

In Pursuit of Opportunity: Alternative Education Pathways for Dropped-Out

Students in Worcester, MA

by

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## ABSTRACT

The intention of this research is to bring us to Worcester, Massachusetts, New England's second largest city, to critically investigate the punitive patterns that exist in the "second chance" opportunity structure experienced by young people who have been dropped-out of schools. The conceptual framework I've constructed pulls from developed theories on the relationship between structural processes, institutional practices and lived experiences of marginalization. There is a need to understand how the process of school leaving, the label of "dropout," and the pursuit of second-chance opportunity are connected and exercise forms of punishment that have clear messages about the worth of these young men's aspirations and the value in fostering support for their opportunities. This critical ethnography introduces the narratives of four young men, marginalized by race and class, whose pursuits of alternative education pathways in Worcester, MA lead them towards constructing an inclusive opportunity on one's own terms. My assertion here is that the social issue is not exclusively about "dropouts," but about the relationships our schools, neighborhoods and society at large have on creating the enabling conditions of opportunity for our most marginalized students.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When speaking about the so-called “dropout problem,” what is the problem? Whose problem is it? Where is the problem? For decades, scholars, researchers, practitioners, and community members have mulled over these issues, shaped the concerns, and crafted the solutions, however, we still struggle with naming the problem itself. The problem of students leaving high schools without diploma completion continues to impact the lives of our young people and shape the communities we live in. Students who “drop-out” are characterized by public discourse and opinion as having low achievement and low motivation, which, based on the logic of meritocracy, is seen as the underlying causes of their own poor social and economic outcomes. This logic allows for “achievers” to exist alongside “failures” in order to sustain a belief in unbounded freedom of opportunity, enabling one to transcend barriers and surpass competition, while the other stands marked for predisposed failure. Where would the successful graduate be without the degenerate “dropout”?

If we frame the context of “dropping out” of high school as a social issue, we include ideological and structural formations as a contributing factor to the high numbers of “dropouts,” rather than reducing the concept of “failure” to the individual alone. In order for the contradiction of inequality to be justified in an “equal opportunity” society, socio-cultural attitudes are constructed to do the ideological work of legitimizing and justifying an inherently flawed system. Centering on the experiential implications of marginalization and exclusion, opportunity, as defined by Iris Marion Young (1990) is “a condition of enablement, which usually involves a configuration of social rules and social

relations, as well as an individual's self-conception and skills"(p. 26). Consider our culturally constructed understanding of the American Dream. The "Dream" is about the accumulation of material goods and social success, unhindered by constraints, solely dependent on an individual's capacity for merit and thrift. If a person is not constrained from doing things, then they are under enabling conditions to do them. The idea that "everyone has the chance to succeed" sounds suspicious at best, when we consider the social investment in marking those that fail to achieve as distinct from those that desire to succeed (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). The construction of the "dropout" is, therefore, a political and ideological project, in that it creates a scapegoat to support the "myth of equal opportunity," despite evidence of unequal access (Fine, 1991). Michelle Fine's critical inquiry on the existence of "dropouts" is of the same vein:

"Who is served by the seamless rhetoric of dropouts as losers? What is obscured by a portrayal of dropouts as deficient in a fair system? If youths who drop out are portrayed as unreasonable or academically inferior, then the structures, ideologies, and practices that exile them systematically are rendered invisible, and the critique they voice is institutionally silenced"(Fine,1991,5)

To elaborate on Fine's inquiry, my frame of the problem is that it is not an individual's inability to seize upon the enabling conditions, to want to succeed or to have the capacity to deserve. It is a problem with the structural conditions of marginality that, as Fine articulates, are "rendered invisible". My assertion here is that the social issue is not exclusively about "dropouts," but about the relationships our schools, neighborhoods and society at large have on creating the enabling conditions of opportunity for our most marginalized students. The larger practical problem here is, if schooling institutions are systematically denying and enabling opportunity differentially, then they are perpetuating



an inequality based on a stratification of quality of life. It is Fine's final words that have me continuing to explore the unknown extent of the problem - the critical need to hear the voice that is institutionally silenced.

### **My Personal Story**

For a time short in breadth, but not short in depth, I was employed as a staff member for an alternative learning non-profit program that targeted "dropouts," who came from under-privileged homes. These young people, ages 16-24, were here for a second chance; many were trying to obtain a GED they had worked for years on, learn a spectrum of job skills and receive a steady minimum wage paycheck. This alternative learning program was one of the stops students came to looking for opportunity in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. From my administrative position, I saw how the program's policies and practices revealed the contradictions that make up our social construction of opportunity. I was tasked with writing an objective position on their "successes" in pursuing opportunity, but I struggled with how to tell this "story". I knew the program's measures of success did not fit the messiness of people's lives, nor did it account for the varied successes as dictated by the participants themselves, often achievements outside of the social script of "common measures". In my time as an employee, I also witnessed how gray areas were negotiated and how unfavorable "outcomes" (where student successes were read as data) were manipulated to fit the success stories that the program and its funders were looking for. Do these outcomes really reflect the success of the individual or the abilities of the program? What was being untold about their lives? How accurately does this construction of opportunity "tell the story" of our young people?

During my time as an employee, the channeling of participant opportunity was most visible during the intake process, where placement standards put pressure on the agency to adjust their recruitment strategies to ensure participants were being selected that would be most able to succeed in being “placed in a successful outcome;” alike a job, skills training courses, college degree-seeking programs or military service. What I witnessed firsthand was how participants were sorted according to 'marketable' traits that could be counted on if invested in. The intake process served as a “gatekeeper” to turn away “risky” applications and shop for the most likely to succeed (Grahame, 1998, p. 87). In an effort to preserve the agency and their jobs, staff contributed to the structural division of labor and fed into the marginalization of those most disadvantaged by schooling institutions. Despite the hard work, ability or ambition of an individual to be able to “show up” for opportunity, participants were pegged from the beginning as less worthy under-performers, relegated to the margins of the program itself. While those deemed to have potential were recognized for their perceived abilities and afforded greater opportunity and flexibilities to succeed in the program and beyond. There was a clear social division among the program participants that reflected larger societal stratification based on perceived and actualized ability.

This contextual example of an alternative learning site's opportunity structure provides a bridge to visualizing the nexus of individual and structural relationships at play. The lack of personal motivation or desire was not the problem here, what was inhibiting were the cultural, structural and individual biases on the part of staff and the regulating forces that influenced this opportunity stratification. On an interpersonal level, we see the impact agents of power have on administering the logic and practice of

guarding opportunity. On a structural level, we see the consequences of institutional decision-making (i.e. grant funding and school dropout policy) and their relationship to agencies that administer opportunity by channeling the successes of its participants. It was through reflection of such patterns and the relative position of intimacy I had to my students and their experiences with being deemed the "problem," that I realized I wasn't necessarily part of a just solution; I too was part of the problem.

I left my time in Worcester asking a number of critical questions: If school forces were in fact "pushing" students out, as many of the narratives I heard over the months indicated, then how were the schools impacting student's process with leaving? If everyone's experiences were different, for why they left or where they're going, then why do we clump them all in a single category of "dropouts"? Since leaving their high schools, what experiences led most of these students to attend alternative learning sites? And, where did we get the notion that because these students left schools that they didn't want to learn and were destined for failure? It was from my experiences with mentoring young people who had been impacted by schooling marginalization that I knew the experiences, opinions and attitudes on "dropouts" were diverse and more complicated than what public discourse would have us think on the subject. It is with this purpose that I sought out student voices to explain how they left and where they were going.

### **Purpose of Study**

In order to understand how these pieces made sense together, I needed to ask critical questions about opportunity when it came to students who had left school and were seeking alternative routes to education in Worcester, MA, a very-low opportunity area

(Kirwan Institute, 2009). I began this inquiry with questions surrounding the experience of being a so-called "dropout". I wanted to know more about how and why young people were leaving school without diplomas. From all the students I had worked with, I heard the stories behind why they left. Despite the diversity among them, there was one common thread that brought them together; they were all looking for a *second chance*. I not only wanted to understand why young people left their high schools, but I wanted to shed light on what young people did next. Where did they go and what struggles or obstacles did they face? What support did they seek and find as they were in pursuit of their second chances? This is a crucial area of inquiry when every year large numbers of students across the city are leaving school with little direction and support in the way of continuing their education and finding paths towards their own pursuits. There appeared to be a direct link between how young people left their high schools and how they conceived second chances in and through education pathways. Of these pathways, there is a need to uncover the connective patterns students experience between their former high school and in the alternative learning sites that many of these students enter in pursuit of educational and employment opportunities in Worcester.

Nationally, the installation of second-chance opportunities in the form of alternative learning sites as solutions to the "dropout problem" have become a common practice among schools and a legitimate path among "dropped-out" students looking for credential completion. Institutions historically have used alternative schools, the "stepchild of public education" as either a dumping ground for "problem students" or pacification for inadequate schooling for our nation's most disadvantaged students (Kelly, 1993). Whereas, students frame alternative schools as a second, third or even fourth

chance to prove themselves, to seek out what they need to move on and actualize opportunity for themselves. Because of the shadowed, second-class status often characterizing alternative learning sites, there has been little investigation into the success of these opportunities as framed in the lives of its participants. This is achieved by acknowledging that discussion on second chance opportunity is best articulated and critiqued by those who must create the paths of opportunity themselves within and among these sites.

A critical ethnographic approach was the most fruitful methodology for this study because it required the experiences and perspectives of young people, who had been discounted in mainstream school districts, to be central authorities on the opportunity structure in Worcester, MA. The perspectives of youth marginalized by race and class who had left a Worcester comprehensive high school without a diploma became the foundation of my critical inquiry. Through interviews with four young black men; Marcus, 21; Terrence, 23; Daryn, 20; and Oscar, 25, we together explored their experiences in high school, what led them to leave without a diploma and where they went with their educational pursuits. This approach allowed for firsthand accounts of their participation with alternative learning sites and the context surrounding their lives as young under-credentialed black men in Worcester, Massachusetts. The conceptual framework I've constructed pulls from developed theories on the relationship between structural processes, institutional practices and lived experiences of marginality. There is a need to understand how the process of school leaving, the label of "dropout," and the pursuit of second-chance opportunity are connected and exercise forms of punishment that have clear messages about the worth of these young men's aspirations and the

investing value of fostering support for their opportunities. Victor Rios and his work *Punished* (2011) seeks to further expand our understanding of social control and punishment by offering definitions that are grounded in lived experience. Punishment, as defined by Rios, is "the process by which individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control" (2011, p. xv). How this process of punitive social control becomes an "instrument which prevents marginalized populations from functioning, thriving, and feeling a sense of dignity and humanity" is what Rios identifies as social incapacitation.

The localized ethnographic perspective of this study reveals the presence of punishment and stigma as experiential patterns in the process of school leaving for these four young men marginalized by race and class. We learn that these patterns extend into these alternative learning sites and, according to these young men, are doing very little to prepare them for successful futures. Not only are these learning sites part of the continuum of places these young men encounter in a system of institutions that punitively regulates their lives, but they practice their own form of punishment; the punishing condition of anticipation. Anticipation in this sense, the expectation of a just opportunity and the eagerness for a better tomorrow, is manipulated in a system that constructs second chances for these young men more as rhetoric than as an opportunity to actualize potential.

The purpose of this study is to critically investigate the punitive patterns that exist in the "second chance" opportunity structure experienced by these four young men who had been placed-out of schools in Worcester, MA. This study seeks to address the

following research questions: Broadly, what are the experiences of students who are placed-out of high school without a credential? What "second chance" paths in education do young men take after being placed-out of school? What punitive patterns are revealed in their school leaving processes and pursuits of opportunity in Worcester? How does the stigmatized label of "dropout" impact the lives of these four young men in Worcester? By understanding these questions through an interdisciplinary frame, I look to expand on existing "dropout" literature to bring light to the experiences young people have with leaving school, pursuing their education and finding gainful employment. In conducting a critical ethnography, I intend to construct a holistic frame where my intention is to make my work meaningful and to sincerely learn about the experiences of opportunity in relation to this particular configuration of education inequities. If we continue to understand the circumstances of "dropped-out" students through a singular lens of personal responsibility, or continue to understand the problem as too complex of an institutional education practice, then we cut ourselves short of thinking critically about solutions. My intention is to bring thoughtful analysis and inquiry about opportunity structures in order to stir thoughtful and proactive solutions.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Part I: "Dropout" & "Pushout" Constructions**

Reviewing the literature on dropouts revealed decades of stigma and stereotypes of young people's lives disrupted and derailed by inequitable education in America. What has been confirmed by critical scholars for quite some time in the field of education is that such identifiers as "dropout" and "pushout" are indeed labels. In the case of "dropout," the more prominent of the two, this culturally constructed label has become fundamental to our notions of failure as representative of those individuals unworthy of merits and benefits. In reviewing its history, we can see how the "dropout" label and who it identifies has changed over time due to socio-cultural, economic and political factors. What has sustained this label is its ability to contain shifting markers of difference that align with normative cultural principles. In the case of "dropout," this label associates the beholder with shifting markers of deviance, stigma, deficit and failure, in a modern meritocratic society that heralds itself on individualism and self-determinism. In order for a stigmatized label to flourish, it must be given opportunity to proliferate into a sustained cultural identity of its own.

#### **Myth of Meritocracy: A Social Construct**

Meritocracy is a myth, a false reflection of reality based on perceived and desired ideals of American success and social mobility. "U.S. society is philosophically and ideologically structured such that all people are supposedly created equally with the same opportunities for success."(Milner,2012, p. 704). This social ideology continues to



support three interrelated ideals that serve in its own maintenance and mythological state. First, the myth perpetuates the belief in a totalizing structure that supports and enables individuals to pursue success based on their own merits and desires. The myth neglects histories of exclusion and obscures the persistence of unequal outcomes by believing in the promise of education institutions as a means towards the "American Dream." Second, the myth involves a faith in unrestricted social mobility, the belief in an absence of inhibitors to success and an equally fair chance at the "American Dream". Inequalities among individuals is overly determined by notions of deficit, individual preference, choice or even luck, ignoring the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities among relations of social and cultural institutions (Young, 1990). Lastly, the myth involves a narrowed conception of achievement in America that overemphasizes individual actions and allows for the persistence of a "logic of blaming," thus, *invisibilizing* group experiences of structural oppression beyond individual control (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Young (1990) asserts that if we are to consider whether persons have opportunities, we must not only consider distributive outcomes, but also a focus on the social structures that enable or constrain individuals. Questioning how this merit based ideology works calls our attention to the equality and inclusivity of America's education institutions and the credibility of a value system based solely on individual merit.

If we are to see the structure of a meritocratic society as self serving or self generating, then we see how "dropouts" play an essential role in this interdependency, as their existence serves to maintain the "truth" of meritocracy. Speaking to the interdependency of failure and success, Raymond McDermott frames a culturally rooted

anthropological causation for the presence of "dropouts" in society. "The one (dropping out and school failure) is consciously frowned on by adults does not mean that it is not essential to the maintenance of its alternative (staying in school and academic success); a high "dropout" rate means that, culturally speaking, many are being invited to drop out"(McDermott, 1989, p. 16). In a meritocratic society, people who fail to achieve are seen as not caring enough to work hard, or are not desirous for successful futures. To believe that everyone has the chance to succeed seems illogical when we consider those that are pushed out of participation. This system based on merit allows for "achievers" to exist alongside "failures," and for the former to believe in their ability to transcend barriers and competition in order to be successful (Fine & Ruglis, 2009).

"Public schools are essential to make the American Dream work, but schools are also the arena in which many Americans first fail. Failure there almost certainly guarantees failure from then on. In the Dream, failure results from lack of individual merit and effort; in reality, failure in school too closely tracks structures of racial and class inequality. Schools too often reinforce rather than contend against the intergenerational paradox at the heart of the American Dream"(Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003, p. 5).

The construction of the "dropout" is, therefore, an ideological and political project in that it creates a scapegoat for the contradictions and a solution for the reinforcement of a practice of meritocracy that privileges some at the expense of others. In order for this contradiction of inequality to be justified in an "equal opportunity" society, socio-cultural attitudes are constructed to do the ideological work of legitimizing and justifying an inherently flawed system. The extent to which these attitudes have material, social and emotional consequences for young people is at the center of this critical exploration of "dropout"/"pushout" as they represent one of our nation's largest educational inequities.

## **Construction of a Label: "Dropout" and "Pushout"**

"There are two armies of youth which have recently sprung up in our society. One is the army of the Peace Corps. The other is the army of the Dropouts. How can youth with such different destinies spring from the same soil, the same neighborhoods, and even from the same families?" - Lucius F. Cervantes, "The Dropout: Causes and Cures" (1965, p. 5)

Marked as crises of educational decay, economic downturns, and moral integrity, the issues of "dropouts" have been cause for concern, both popularly and scholarly for the last few generations. The definition of a "dropout," given by the Office of Education Resources and Improvement (1987) states: "a pupil who leaves school, for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school"(McDermott, 1989, pp. 19-20). The notion of students leaving school has been named as such a crisis, even a "disease," since the 1960's with Cervantes depiction of "the Dropout" as the "new minority." Here, Cervantes determines social background, influential others, and personality characteristics as having an effect on why the "dropout" student exists. This depiction distinguishes the "dropout" as outside the normal affiliations with peer groups, affected by less solidarity in the home, and marked with trouble in their school experience (Cervantes, 1965, p. 8). Characteristics that are commonly found in potential or actual dropouts were described by Cervantes' (p. 198) study as such:

1. Two years behind in reading or arithmetic at seventh grade level. Majority of grades are below average.
2. Failure of one or more school years
3. Irregular attendance and frequent tardiness.
4. Performance consistently below potential
5. No participation in extracurricular activities
6. Frequent change of schools
7. Behavior problems requiring disciplinary measures

## 8. Feeling of 'not belonging'

In asking the question, "Why do American youth drop out of high school?" his claim at this time in the evolution of "dropout" scholarship was that of general deficit and lack of motivation, attributed to either psychological or social problems. With the works of Cervantes and many others scholars to follow, education studies in the 1970s and 80's crafted the "dropout" as a problem following the then popular logic of Oscar Lewis' (1959) "culture of poverty" theory locating the problem of poverty in the individual, their family, and communities. These explanations came out of a particular time and context of a "War on Poverty," a political economy that saw incredible shifts in the labor market, employment structures, as well as cultural and ideological affiliations. As the economy has shifted dramatically since this post-war era, the demands for a more educated and globally connected workforce has placed pressure on the American public education system to raise standards and decrease the "dropout rate" by retaining students and improving graduation/completion rates (Barton, 2005). This reinvigorated quest left researchers, education policy makers, educators and a concerned public with questions to address: Why are students dropping out? How do we locate these factors? And what constitutes a dropout student?

"Dropout" and "Pushout" as social constructs have since produced two major explanatory poles for why students are leaving school prematurely. The first seeks to understand the problem as a personal problem, thus organizing policy and practice for interventions to address individual needs and deficiencies. This position claims youth are in full control over their decisions and minimizes influencing environmental factors that exist in schools. The other pole aligns itself with naming systematic or environmental

factors that contribute to the problem as a social issue. This perspective recognizes the role schools play in creating conditions for deficit and places emphasis on institutional pressures that lead students to leave school (Kelly, 1993, Tuck, 2012).

*Personal Problem: Dropout.* This paradigm largely benefits the social idea that one's own merit is what gets you to the top of a social hierarchy. As a "personal problem" "dropout" students are framed as inherent underachievers made up of individuals who are unsuccessful in academics and life. This "type" of student is often defined as deficient, lazy, troubled, helpless, hopeless and delinquent (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993, Dei et al. 1997). This excerpt from the National Research Council on Dropouts, as recent as 2011, provides a sampling of the pervasiveness of this dogma:

"Students who drop out often have low achievement and low motivation, factors that contribute to poor performance in school and poor functioning in society. These and other personal attributes may be the underlying cause of the poor social and economic outcomes experienced by this group; *dropping out may be a symptom of the problem rather than the cause*"(*emphasis added*; National Academy of Education, 2011, p. 12).

The last line in particular speaks to the prevailing discourse that positions dropping out as a "symptom" of something that is wrong with the individual rather than the cumulative experience of dropping out being related to institutional exclusion. This is consistent with other trends in education research that favor correlation models and position students' behaviors, school performance, psychological states, and family background as independent variables associated with individual, family or cultural failure (Kelly, 1993). Focusing on the "dropout" as deficient encourages an "at-risk" model based on preconceived and narrow categories of deviance, non-normative behaviors, and relative disadvantage. The popular discourse reflected in education scholarship on "at-risk"

students frames these "types" of students as having limited opportunities, inadequate access to social, political and economic resources and being "at-risk" of larger social woes; i.e. unemployment, crime, risk, welfare enrollment (National Research Council, 2001, 2011). Factors that have since become parlance on what influences and positions a student as "at-risk" to drop-out include: students coming from low-income, single-parent and/or less-educated households, students who are frequently absent or truant, students with a record of disciplinary problems, students failing classes or repeat grade levels, students with poor relationships with teachers and administrators, and students who frequently change schools (Bowditch, 1993:493; Tanner et. al. 1995; Barton, 2005).

In discussing how to qualify individual indicators, researchers turned to common misconceptions and framings of "dropouts" that associated behaviors as the consequence of poor values; and their circumstances the repercussions of their own poor judgments (National Research Council, 2011). Reinforced by the authority of public discourse, the behaviors, attitudes and perspectives of "dropouts" have consequentially been relegated to the margins of inclusion on the solutions (Cervantes, 1965). What researchers and education strategists have summarized as the objective of schools is the need to keep students in school by convincing them to stay and support (read as "correct") those deemed to be "at-risk"(Wells, 1990, Bowditch, 1993, Barton, 2005). What's problematic about this approach is its focus on "at-risk" individuals as both the source of the problem and the solution to minimizing "drop-out" numbers. Campbell (2003) identifies how these empirical misperceptions lead to narrow legislation (i.e. No Child Left Behind) and unsuccessful "at-risk" prevention programs that attempt to determine which students are more likely to "drop-out". These assumptions lead to stereotypes that allow for an

authoritative position to "read" the lives of students in particular ways. In attempting to uncover indicators and causal effects, researchers have too often reduced "failure" to the individual and ignored the structural conditions behind such conceptions of failure (National Research Council, 2011).

*Social Issue: Pushout.* Bowditch (1993) acknowledged that in the late 80's to early 90's very little research had been done on the relationship between student's behaviors and dropping out with how school environments created the conditions for student truancy, academic failure or disobedience (p. 494). At the time of her research, Shirley Wells (1990) notes the possibility of schools themselves being an influence on students' decisions to drop-out, though she notes "little attention or concrete evidence has proven this"(1990, p. 5). Wells uses the research of Wehlage and Rutter (1986) in describing the process of becoming a "dropout" and how the school contributes to the problem by making a student feel rejected in the institution. Critical investigations into dominant perspectives on "dropouts" turned the focus towards schools, locating the problem in schools' responsibility in "pushing" students out, and creating conditions where students were at a disadvantage for adulthood. Reasons for why young people leave high school are varied and numerous, as evidenced by many critical studies that explore the reasons why young people leave (Fine, 1991, Tanner et. al, 1995, Dei et. al, 1997). The diversity of school leaving experiences found in these works contradict the falsely understood label of "dropout" as a homogenous set of students, whose similar experiences, ideologies and notions of self put them "at-risk" of dropping out.

For these reasons, the students as being spoken about rather than being heard from became the discursive context with which critical "dropout" research was encouraged. It

was with Michelle Fine's work in "Framing Dropouts" (1991) that we acknowledge an emerging shift in pursuing this relationship and holding schools accountable. Fine's work also uniquely contributed to the field of "dropout" research by requiring greater responsibility and ethical stance in including young people's perspectives on the matter. It was understood that working within these deficit, "at-risk" frameworks limit our conceptions and solutions to the "crisis" as they are at odds with the realities of the lived experiences of those most affected by these discourses. Critical education scholars recognize the heterogeneity of experience among all students and regard other factors outside the control of the individual as contributing to their cumulative education experiences (Fine, 1991, Dei et al, 1997, Lopez, 2003, Campbell, 2003). Critical insights into "dropout" experience aim to incorporate the intersecting influences of the school environment and the socio-political context that factors into school experience and causes students to be "pushed-out" of schools.

What is popularly known as "push-out," distinguishes school experiences that resemble unequal economic, political and social structures and points to conditions and practices that exclude, discriminate or stigmatize certain students (Kelly, 1993). "Pushout", according to Eve Tuck, is used to describe the "experiences of those youth who have been pressured to leave school by people or factors inside school, such as disrespectful treatment from teachers and other school personnel, violence among students, arbitrary school rules, and the insurmountable presence of high stakes testing"(Tuck, 2012, p. 61). This definition encompasses much of the institutional pressure that is behind student "push-out," however, it may be limited in its ability to capture the holistic experience of leaving school. Tuck also acknowledges "pushout" may



be "too meek a term that protects the closeted inner-workings of a system determined to fail city students...their stories are not stories of mere pushout, but squeezed, kicked, punched, sliced out. Cast out. Stamped out. Erased"(2012, p. 61).

In the chapter, "Discharging the Student Bodies," Michelle Fine argues for a revealing of comprehensive high schools' "rationalized exiting of student bodies," and the need to "trace the laws and school-based practices that produce the heavy flow of discharges" from school (p. 81). The critical contribution of this chapter provides lived experiences and critiques of schooling that illustrate the complex dynamics and consequences for student discharge. Those students who left because of "family problems", being held back or "choosing" to leave she includes as forced-out students, despite rhetoric that may claim these to be individual decisions. To prove her case, she argues it is the "unresponsive institutional arrangements" that push students toward the exiting door, alongside those students who were coerced to leave through a "pushout" discharge. Michelle Fine describes the consequence of these institutional practices best: "Perhaps this is the most compelling consequence of institutionalized silencing. When the policies and practices of purging are rendered invisible, no one but the adolescent is held to blame"(1991, p. 82).

### **Students Leave: The Process of Disengagement**

When "drop-out" or "push-out" is seen as a process of disengagement, and not an event, we can begin to uncover these experiences that lead to the ultimate act of school leaving. Kelly (1993) believes using "disengagement" rather than "dropout" or "pushout" is most useful to highlight the process because "the concept of disengagement connotes a long-

running, interactive process which may be reversible"(p. 29). The process is cumulative, complex and long-term. Other interpretations of this process claim the accumulation of problems young people are confronted with (family, school, and society) can eventually result in dropping out (Wells, 1990). Difficult to document because it happens over time, the process is not always observable. In order to capture the number of paths and fluidity among them, and not just the end points, disengagement can be understood to occur at different levels of intensity and for different reasons. Fine (1991) saw disengagement as a "mutual process of rejection" between the schooling institution and the student, where the motion of one is passed on to the other.

To capture this process of disengagement, many scholars have looked to record student's educational life histories to gather a broader scope of experience (Fine, 1990, Kelly, 1993, Dei et. al, 1997). Fine's (1991) work contributes to the complexity of schooling experiences by acknowledging the ways young people feel disengaged through exclusion. Specifically, her use of students as "disappeared" points to the exercises of exclusion found in the space between the interpersonal and the procedural structures of the institution:

"Rationalized production of dropouts happened not at the entrance door, and not in legally sanctioned, explicit ways...exclusion happens when "my Momma comes and they show her no respect"...it happens when national suspension and expulsion rates double for Black and Latino students...exclusion festered inside the fifteen-year-old history book introduced by a white teacher to her African-American student body...exclusion was being held back in grade because you missed classes January through March, nursing your grandmother back to health...exclusion was being absent for five days and never being missed, or hearing that a diploma will bring you success, but knowing that your mother, uncle and brothers, all graduates, can't find work" (Fine, 1991, pp. 24-25).

The ethnographic narratives contributed here expand the scope of institutional critique by revealing unique silenced exclusions happening at multiple experiential levels. Fine recognizes the environmental inequalities that are present in the communities these young people live in, the work they have available to them, and the society they are entering into as adults. She adds that schools are just a piece of these cumulative experiences that contribute to the process of disengagement.

Lopez (2003) contributes to this conversation of disengagement by conducting in-depth ethnography of the school space, home life and workplace to reveal gender-ing and race-ing processes that encouraged or discouraged positive outlooks on education. Lopez interviewed young Black women and men who became disengaged with school and had feelings of general distrust in the school system's ability to prepare them for successful futures in higher education (2003, p. 43). Her contribution furthers the discussion by revealing the "race-gender experiences" of participants and how they contribute to the development of "race-gender outlooks", what she defines as a cumulative effect of life perspectives on education and social mobility (Lopez, 2003, p.164). Lopez found the young Black women in her study used education to prove social stereotypes about them were wrong, whereas young Black men felt education was not necessarily an available option to combat oppression, and therefore doubted its prospects for social mobility. It is the process of disengagement and its impact on education outlooks that can ultimately impact the education futures of students made to take alternative paths. "Low expectations, negative reinforcement, and alienation associated with dropping out are internalized and can place limits on self-esteem and ultimately life chances" (Dei et al,

1997, p. 54). In agreeing with Lopez, I perceive the interactions and the school setting to be *the* solidifying space for individual's educational outlooks.

Eve Tuck's (2012) work on GED seekers and earners looks to understand the experiences and relationships young people had to the institutional and interpersonal mechanisms of control in their schools. The critical perspectives she contributes to the field are immensely significant because they center youth perspectives and theories as primary to understanding the complexity of schooling. What she calls "Humiliating ironies", is defined as seeing the hypocrisy that exists around them in the relationships and structures of exclusion--"the unintended consequences of school policies and the disrespectful interactions between school personnel and youth"(2012, p. 68). In Tuck's perspective these ironies not only exclude, they invite more students to go than stay in the ways they assault student's dignities. Tuck's (2012) conception of "dangerous dignities", an "emergent theory of youth resistance to injustices in their schooling," is a student exercising self-preservation and self-determination (p. 61) in "response to and in anticipation of "the ongoing presence of humiliating ironies" (p. 68). Tuck relates these two constructs in a dialectic that makes up the construct of school "pushout". Best understood as a dialectic based on its relative position as a process of disengagement and the difficult (even redundant) nature to determine its beginning, end or origin (Tuck, 2012). The fluidity of how they relate in the dialectic is of importance here because, as Tuck suggests, it "blurs the lines between personal and institutional responsibilities" (2012, p. 69). Based on the perspectives running through the course of this research, Tuck's significant reliance on the "pushout" dialectic over "dropout" allows youth to assert self-preservation, critique and defiance of a broken system, while striving for

dignity is seen as a justifiable position upon equitable grounds in response to institutional procedures and pressures that have already legitimized student exiting as punishment.

When schools qualify a student's leaving as "choice," those in power to label are enacting a punishment and determination of worth. In thinking critically about the number of students leaving and the way in which they are leaving, Fine (1991) takes us through a number of critical questions:

"From inside the school, the discharge process appears to most, as inevitable, necessary, and nondisruptive. But, would this process appear inevitable, necessary and nondisruptive if 66 percent of white middle-class students were discharged from a ninth-grade cohort? If almost one-third of a school were disappeared between September and June? Or would the process and the structures that support it, grow suspect for collusion in the perpetuation of social injustice? If silencing exports critique, discharge dispenses with bodies" (p.69).

How can we see the impact these consequences have on young people's trajectories and development? How can the prevalence of disengagement be explained on a larger scale? These ethnographic explorations expose how youth who experience disengagement are uniquely positioned in cycles of punishment that expose them to a greater chance of experiencing political and economic marginalization.

## **PART II: Punished Opportunity**

Nearly two decades later, Michelle Fine's work continues to define and influence the education literature on "dropout/pushout" and challenge the field to be critical of our knowledge. In an effort to distill the complicated web of privilege created by an education system of inequality, Fine and Ruglis (2009) parameter the "neo-liberal policy matrix" that produces racialized consequences in the form of disadvantage for youth of color, immigrant or poor students, while creating spaces of privilege and opportunity for

White and wealthy students. What they name as the circuits and consequences of dispossession, is an intentional "distribution of educational opportunities that imparts a systematic miseducation and diploma denial onto racialized bodies" (Fine & Ruglis, 2009: abstract). These discussions on inequalities in education opportunity have been described more commonly as the "Achievement Gap," but more recently as the "Opportunity Gap."

Richard Milner (2012) makes the argument that we should move away from "Achievement Gap" constructions of education inequality and consider "Opportunity Gaps" as a better explanatory framework for inequality. His argument suggests a focus on achievement is "antithetical to diversity," and emphasizes its standardization is based on normative constructions of achievement. "Achievement gap explanations can force us to focus on individual students as well as groups of students rather than inequitable, racist, and sexist structures, systems, contexts, policies, and practices that lead to perceived achievement gaps"(Milner, p. 696). An opportunity gap explanatory framework includes a diverse, contextual, structural and culturally-aware model for understanding education inequities and differential access to opportunity.

Given an opportunity gap framework, it is clear how educational credentials become gatekeepers to employment, living standards, health and a number of other qualitative aspects of well-being (Fine & Ruglis, 2009, Milner, 2012). Schools then become the sites of and spaces for controlling this access to opportunity and in contributing to defining its parameters. The act of graduating high school becomes a "mechanism of sorting" that contributes to the persistence of a hierarchical social structure (Campbell, 2003). Fine (1991) would equate these mechanisms of sorting with

the institutional practices of "exiling the bodies, minds and subjectivities" of most low-income African American and Latino youth in urban areas. These patterns, she powerfully asserts, "stand as evidence that the promise of equal opportunity is subverted institutionally by the guarantee of unequal educational outcomes"(Fine, 1991, p. 26). How this "mechanism" works is that those students with the greatest economic disadvantage receive the worst and most marginalizing education in our nation. The current social structure depends on barriers and blockades to maintain order, clearly the evidence of such exclusionary practices can be seen in how the "dropout" rate in our society exacerbates gaps of inequality. In other words, "educational outcomes for these students are at least as much as a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, both inside and outside of school, as they are a function of race, class, or culture"(Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 30).

In focusing on the effort and achievements of individual agents, society tends to overlook or deny the structural and institutional framework of oppression. Thus, discrimination in the educational system is seen as the exception when it should be seen as the norm. The system of education is but one of the American institutions that structures exploitation and opportunity hoarding to correspond with categorical boundaries. "Opportunity hoarding occurs when one social group restricts access to a scarce resource, either through outright denial or by exercising monopoly control that requires out-group members to pay rent in return for access. Either way, opportunity hoarding is enabled through a socially defined process of exclusion"(Massey, 2007, p.6). The institutional structures that contribute to the disempowerment and oppression of categorical groups can be attributed to larger cultural discourses that frame the urban

school population as inherent underachievers. This is significantly clear in the uneven distribution of material and symbolic resources in urban public schools. As noted by the NAACP (n.d.) issue report on the school-to-prison-pipeline and racial segregation:

"The inadequacies of the public education system, especially in areas of concentrated poverty, have set students up to fail, as continuing resource deficiencies--evidenced by a lack of experienced or certified teachers and guidance counselors, advanced instruction, early intervention programs, extracurricular activities, and safe, well equipped facilities--lock many students into second-class educational environments that neglect their needs and make them feel disengaged from their school"(Section - A failing education system)

The NAACP's position investigates the issues surrounding factors influencing institutional exclusions and its prevalence among urban youth of color. How these factors correlate to processes of disengagement and higher levels of disciplinary suspensions and expulsions will lead us to question the implementation of accountability and zero-tolerance policies, the severity of discipline consequences and the heightened control that illustrates an institutional collusion with the prison industrial complex (Hirschfield, 2010).

### **Modern Drivers of "Dropout/Pushout" Rates: Accountability and Discipline**

As a result of quantitative and qualitative research on "dropouts/pushout" over the past decade, findings have revealed how neo-liberal policies initiated in the earlier part of the 21st century under No Child Left Behind legislation have put immense pressure on districts and individual educators to adhere to government-determined accountability measures and encouraged an implementation of zero-tolerance discipline policies that resulted in an overwhelming "purge" of students who did not meet normative requirements. Accountability policies in response to achievement gaps in education focus



on the standardization of policies and practices that assume an even playing field among individuals and groups. "Results on outcomes such as standardized tests provide information about a particular, socially constructed way of thinking about what students know and need to know"(Milner, 2012, p. 694) This focus on unequal outcomes rather than the process that leads to these outcomes allow for contextually-blind understanding on the schooling policies and procedures that impact these differential outcomes (Milner, 2012). Under accountability measures, schools must meet adequate benchmarks and education standards determined by federal and state legislation. The legislation did not openly defer the "dropout problem" issue, but instead created a more pressing issue that would shadow the discourse and practice of purging students:

"Thus, while No Child Left Behind (NCLB) contained language intended to bring the dropout problem into the forefront, the regulatory guidance assigned it less priority than test-based progress indicators...there were many concerns that the test-based mandates would lead schools to "push" low-performing students out of school in an effort to increase test scores"(National Research Council, 2011, p.20)

This interpretation of NCLB exemplifies how the contradiction of sound institutional practice and high-stakes standardized testing provide grounds for justifying the push-out of "academically weak and/or disruptive students"(Tuck, 2012, p.99). Schools are put in difficult positions requiring administrators to strategically find "convenient" ways to meet accountability standards and cover-up educational deficiencies. "The school accountability narrative suggests that teachers and principals from financially strapped schools can meet externally imposed demands to boost standardized test scores and attendance rates by excluding low-achievers and truants"(Hirschfield, 2008, p. 85). The report presented by the Advancement Project illustrates the increase in school

suspensions and expulsions rates as correlating with the instatement of NCLB and school adoption of accountability measures. "There are a number of widely used strategies for manipulating test scores, such as withdrawing students from attendance rolls, assigning students to alternative schools, coercing or encouraging students to drop out or enroll in GED programs, along with using suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools"(Advancement Project,2010, p. 6). Studies show that African-American students are far more likely than their white peers to be suspended, expelled, or arrested for similar conduct at school (NAACP, Section-punishment without a crime). These forms of school punishment have been found to influence a more direct route into the school-to-prison pipeline. "Arrests in school represent the most direct route into the school-to-prison pipeline, but out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools also push students out of school and closer to a future in the juvenile and criminal justice systems"(NAACP, Section- punishment without a crime). Overall, the increased severity of discipline records has been found to impact a disproportionate number of Black and Brown students nationally, either through suspensions or expulsions, as compared to their white peers.

### **Discipline in Schools**

Victor Rios and his work *Punished* (2011) seek to further expand our understanding of social control and punishment by offering definitions that are grounded in lived experience. His principal argument is in presenting the youth control complex, as "a system in which schools, police, probation officers, families, community centers, the media, businesses, and other institutions systematically treat young people's everyday

behaviors as criminal activity"(p. xiv). According to Rios, this phenomenon is not new. The web of institutions in the youth control complex creates an overarching system of regulating the lives of marginalized Black and Brown boys that Rios refers to as Punitive Social Control. My understanding of how we come to see Punitive Social Control as part of everyday lives is in the mechanisms and instruments of this system (the institutions and people representing those institutions) that socialize and punish individuals to follow rules and laws. Punishment, as defined by Rios, is the process by which individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control (p. xv).

These themes occurring in the lives of his Rios' participants can be seen circulating in other institutional contexts where the appearance of criminalizing patterns and mechanisms of control and punishment are ubiquitous. How these practices reach realms outside of the criminal justice system and impact or even target Black and Brown populations is the concern taken up by the NAACP in their report on the "school-to-prison-pipeline:"

"In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them into a one-way path toward prison. These various policies...push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually the criminal, justice system, where prison is the end of the road"(NAACP, n.d. ,Overview Section)

The argument presented by NAACP speaks to a linear path where students are removed intentionally from their schools and placed into a quick-track for prison. The intricate

web of this pipeline suggests a linear pathway to prison, but what Rios and others illustrate are the ways youth experience constant cycles of mistreatment and punishment in schools that extend to form a larger web of control that constructs barriers and limited opportunity (Hirschfield, 2008). What then becomes a critical point to investigate in the process of criminalization is how young people's "styles and behaviors are rendered deviant and are treated with shame, exclusion, punishment,"(Rios,2011, p. xiv) resulting in "school disciplinary policies, practices and staff perceptions of poor students of color in a manner that promotes greater punishment and exclusion"(Hirschfield, 2008, p. 79) . These patterns are occurring in the way criminal justice approaches enters the education experiences of young people directly or indirectly, particularly, in the way schooling institutions use "templates for solving other social problems, such as poverty, school truancy, school failure, family conflict and youth delinquency"(Rios,2011, pp. 37-38).

In the appropriately titled work, "Getting Rid of Troublemakers," Christine Bowditch (1993) examines how disciplinary procedures such as involuntary drops, suspensions and transfers are used to discriminately produce "dropouts" and perpetuate racial and class stratification. Bowditch addressed the parallels of the criminal justice system and school disciplinary procedures as it was racially and class biased.

"The way certain youth come to police attention in the first place and the factors that influence police decisions to take official action--in other words, to construct a 'prior' record--is connected to race and class...how school workers construct the records that 'explain' suspensions...how grades, demeanor, and prior record are linked in practice to suspensions"(Bowditch, 1993, p. 494).

It was these school policies and procedures that Bowditch found encouraged disciplinarians "get rid of students they deem as 'troublemakers'"(1993, p. 495).

Bowditch's observations of punitive social control in the discipline office and conversations with administrators, teachers, and students revealed daily disciplinary activities and standard strategies for dealing with misconduct and "troublemakers".

"In practice, disciplinarians rarely questioned students about the details of their misbehavior or the reasons behind them. Instead, after identifying the charge against the student, they moved on to a series of questions about grades, attendance, previous suspensions, and in some instances, the student's year in school, age, or plans for employment. A student's answers, rather than the particular circumstances of his actions, identified the misconduct's meaning to the disciplinarians. Only when a student's academic profile seemed to violate the disciplinarian's expectations would he or she inquire further about the charges against the student. They sought to punish "types of students" more than "types of behavior" (Bowditch, 1993, p. 500)

The interactions Bowditch observed here highlight the forms of punishment (shame, hopelessness, defeat, outcast) used against students as part of an everyday disciplinary procedure. Hirschfield found these everyday procedures were trending toward "zero-tolerance" policies in the criminal justice system that had little consideration for "mitigating circumstances," allowing a one size fits all approach based on "uniform procedural and disciplinary guidelines evolving around the nature of the offense rather than the discretion of teachers and other traditional disciplinary agents"(2008, pp. 81-82). He concludes it is this lack of discretion in the hands of control agents that has allowed an intensification of a standardized use of suspensions and expulsions as symbolic criminalization."Education agencies that increase their use of exclusionary punishments endorse the prevailing rationale of contemporary criminal justice practice--deterrence and incapacitation"(Hirschfield,2008, p. 82). Individuals were up against a socially constructed institutional profile of them that was used coercively to measure the worthiness of the individual as a student. Bowditch found the use of the "troublemaker"

label was often ambiguous, based on situational factors and biases of school personnel. As school practices are influenced by normative constructions of deviance and created at more systemic levels (i.e., district or state laws), it is the school personnel that are left to interpret and implement the rules.

In Bowditch's (1993) research on school personnel, she found a very critical comparison to understanding the link between labels and their part in school push-out process. The indicators disciplinarians used to single out "troublemakers" were indeed the same factors that educational research has identified as students who are "at-risk" of dropping out (Bowditch, 1993). To amplify this correlation, examples of such "at-risk" factors are: students who failed classes, used drugs, frequently disrupted class, truant or missing class, records of suspensions, family profile, frequency of transfers, test scores, little academic progress and behind in grade levels, external involvement in the juvenile justice system. To be a "truant," a "distraction," a "troublemaker," a "delinquent" were labels that factored into identifying students whom school workers believed did not belong in school (Bowditch, 1993, p.500). Rios' research on punishment indicated a process of "labeling hype," a layered effect where agencies of social control further stigmatize and marked boys in response to their original label (Rios, 2011, p.45). The attitudes about truant students are type-casted to fit a disciplinary construct that is used as legitimacy for the punitive responses by these social control institutions. Students that are truant, for example, are labeled as "trouble-makers" or "rule-breakers" and are more likely to be defined and treated as criminals (Hirschfield, 2008). The impact of labels is significant interpersonally and in the lived experience of punishment, but perhaps more significant in the labels themselves begin to accumulate. The sum of these labels are what

school personnel determine as an overall disobedience of school authority, revealing how the accumulation of daily disciplinary procedures are in fact excluding labeled students and perpetuating racial and class stratification (Bowditch,1993). "Labels have little impact on the individual identities of marginalized black males, but they have a big effect on young people's social mobility"(Rios, 2011, p.45).

Based on Rios' findings, one could say that the "dropout" label is treated with a punishing societal shame, though perhaps a label that is less visible and with less impact on individuals day to day experience. However, in considering the blocked opportunity and its material consequences, the stigma attached to "dropouts" as losers, bums and degenerates, does play a role in creating a barrier to opportunity.

"Since the accused individual's social, political and economic resources shape the capacity to reject or mitigate the stigma of a deviant label, labeling may produce additional deviance merely by cutting off access to legitimate resources and opportunities...thus, the power and social resources attached to class and racial status may affect both the initial interpretation of a person's actions and the consequences following from that interpretation"(Bowditch, 1993, p. 495).

Acknowledged as deviant in a society that places social and material capital on receiving an education, the "dropout" has done wrong to oneself and society, alike a criminal in need of punishing. In this "era of personal responsibility," Rios (2011) found that his participants of marginalized social positions often internalized these messages, and reported feeling personally responsible for their plight. This inculcation of individual blame largely means that structural barriers and limitations go unaccounted for in understanding a "dropout's" limited opportunities and life chances. The personal responsibility discourse that encourages the stigma towards "dropouts" is the accumulation of deviant labels and punitive social control that entice differential

treatment and punishment for perceived past transgressions. "The logic and practice of punitive social control has prevented many marginalized young people from gaining acceptance, affirmation, and achievement in school, landing a job, or catching a break or learning a reintegrative lesson for minor transgressions from police and probation officers"(Rios,2011, p. 160). Scholars invested in understanding the "dropout" label have suggested dismantling and discontinuing the use of the word because of its relative discursive position to social and material barriers (Dei, et al, 1997, p. 46). The notion of blocked opportunity is explored further in what Rios defines as social incapacitation, the microaggressive form of social death. In his own elaboration, social incapacitation is "the process by which punitive social control becomes an instrument which prevents marginalized populations from functioning, thriving, and feeling a sense of dignity and humanity in their daily interactions with institutional forces"(Rios, 2011, p. 160). This social positioning of "dropouts" contributes to our understanding of how the accumulation of punitive measures in education contexts can add to an increased blockage to "material, emotional and symbolic resources"(Massey, 2007) for sustaining quality of life.

Regardless of one's background, most American citizens have been influenced by meritocratic values of success and opportunity. The "dropout" label and its accumulation of other social labels portray these young people as "failing" to fulfill these societal and cultural values of merit, relegating them as social outcasts separated from full inclusion in society. When seen as not worthy of full inclusion in society, certain rights, privileges and opportunities are usually denied allowing for punishment and control to be legitimized. Rhetoric that calls on young people to work for their futures, to prove



themselves for past transgressions are faced with institutional barriers and doors already shut (Tanner et al., 1995).

### **PART III: Alternative Learning Sites and Opportunities**

"Dropping out is, of course, the ultimate failure for a student in the post-industrial economy--a failure that usually causes deep and irreversible life-long damage to a student and his future family"(Orfield and Lee, 2005, p. 37).

An open window in the form opportunity, in this case, becomes something that cannot be emphasized enough in the "repatriation"(Tuck, 2012) of a student denied a diploma and access to resources. The pursuit of opportunity is a guarded process controlled by institutions and people representing those institutions. "Second chance" paths, as they are part of the school leaving process, are significant to youth who are faced with declining opportunities for social mobility and earnings in the job market. The opportunities available for youth, particularly the GED, provide an alternative route to secondary school completion. However, despite its appeal, the "de-facto reliance on the GED" by secondary institutions and its use as a "last alternative" for youth has made it a problematic opportunity.

### **Historical Frame of Alternative Learning Sites**

What Deidre Kelly calls a "chameleon quality" is the "second-chance" school's ability over the years to "change colors and present themselves as an innovative solution to the community's latest, most pressing fears and concerns about teenagers"(1993, p. 34). Our earliest second chance schools were called continuation schools. Those schools found inside factories were opposed by early 20th century education progressives who argued a

dual system of vocational and academic centered schools would deny equal opportunity, as it was originally designed for young low-class workers or immigrants, not the children of the elite (Kelly, 1993, p. 39). Continuation schools originally had a gendered intention, as they were constructed to provide young male workers, aged fourteen to eighteen with a few hours per week of schooling for civic or vocational intelligence; "a campaign to fit schooling better to boys, particularly those who seemed non-academic in inclination or ability"(Tyack and Hansot (1990) as cited in Kelly, 1993, p. 38).

According to Kelly, most states received federal aid for part-time general continuation classes during the 1920s and 1930s. Enrollment was concentrated in large industrial centers in a handful of states (i.e. Worcester, Massachusetts) where the model had been "primarily designed for city school personnel and their perceived problems: poverty, large influxes of non-English-speaking immigrants, and juvenile delinquency"(Kelly, 1993, p. 40). Designed to provide occupational and moral guidance to low-income and immigrant youth, the continuation school model shifted in the 1930's to support a depressed economy. In the early Depression years, compulsory attendance laws were strengthened to control idle youth and lessen the employment competition for adults, thus requiring working students to attend continuation schools part-time.(Kelly, 1993, p. 44) This 1930's shift toward more academic-centered continuation school curriculums brought higher enrollments of women looking for employable skills and alternative basic education in English and math, among other reasons (for other arguments for the rise in women enrollments, see Kelly, 1993, p. 44-46). With the rise in attendance of "maladjusted" students to full-time comprehensive school, an increase in enrollments of young adult females and the shift away from part-time vocational training,

critics began to question the purpose of the continuation school as purely "vocational", and pushed arguments to adapt the model to an "Adjustment School"(Kelly, 1993).

In 1932, the California State Department of Education, the leader on continuation schools, put out an argument that "if it is the policy of the school district to place such [maladjusted] pupils in the continuation school, then the school becomes an opportunity school and must make its curricula flexible enough to include pupils whose problems are not primarily vocational"(Kelly, 1993, p.50). The California continuation school system spearheaded the adjustment model movement (1945-1965), with a psychology/counseling focus, aimed to aid "unadjusted" school-aged children who were mal-ill and not fit for full-time school, the workplace, the home, society or life. It was the responsibility of teachers to "adjust these students' attitudes toward school, work, and authority early in order to prevent delinquency"(Kelly, 1993, p. 48-49). By 1950, the California State Department of Education characterized the "unadjusted" as:

"Students who are retarded in school, students with little interest in the school program, students needing remedial work in certain fields, students with limited physical capacity, students returning to school after long periods of absence, transfers, late enrollees, students needing special guidance such as habitual truants, juvenile court problems, behavior cases, health problems, and students requiring rehabilitation"(Kelly, 1993, p.51).

To further the Department's argument, it was "personal, family, and environmental 'handicaps'" that were assumed to "cause general maladjustment"(Kelly, 1993). By the 1960's the tag, "divergent youth" began to replace "maladjusted," as students who didn't "work up to their mental ability in school, who resist academic learning, and who make up the larger portion of social problems, academic failures and school dropouts"(Kelly, 1993, p. 57). Continuation schools in the mid-1960's saw a rise in popularity based on the

1964 Economic Opportunity Act and the installment of dual education and training programs, such as JobCorps (Barton, 2005). Then headed by the Department of Secondary Education, continuation schools began to establish adjustment programs as public alternative schools, and were intended for "divergent youth," i.e. potential and actual dropouts (Kelly, 1993). However, by the mid-1980's, restructuring of government spending led to a retrenchment of funding and a leveling of a number of alternative opportunities (Barton, 2005). In analyzing the solutions to at-risk students in the late 1980's, Shirley Wells (1990) found that there was a "renewed desire" to keep students in the school system, causing districts to develop programs that would address early prevention and meet the needs of "at-risk" students. The glaring problem with this approach is the treatment of "at-risk" students as a homogenous group with similar, if not the same, categorical experiences with the process disengagement that led to an exit in the form of "dropout/pushout" (Kelly, 1993).

### **Modern Versions of Alternative Learning Sites**

In Kelly's (1993) research on the history of continuation schools she found that despite the programmatic changes, continuity has existed in the presence of "misfits" among the student body, yielding a structural anticipation of "a solution in search of a problem". "These misfits included disproportionate numbers of certain ethnic minorities, working-class or low-income students, and those who had violated middle-class norms of sexual behavior (i.e. pregnant girls, mothering or married teens, overtly gay males)" (1993, p. 36). With nomenclature shifts from "Continuation" to "Alternative," the proliferation of learning sites have created varieties and degrees of engagement for student learning.

Alternative Schools have been cited as usually being housed outside the comprehensive school, requiring students to be removed from the school population, whereas Alternative Programs are usually located within the comprehensive school itself. These models of alternative schools currently exist within the public education system, either as separate schools or as programs within schools. These schools are often limited in size and scope of opportunities and support provided based on funding constraints, limited enrollment space and insufficient staffing.

Features that have come to characterize continuation schools are: Small in size, personalized learning environment, student involvement in decision making, innovative learning techniques, community involvement, flexible and reduced school schedule, extra counseling, open entry/exit, curricular emphasis on personal growth, vocational and academic goals, access to secondary education credential in the form of a diploma or General Educational Development (GED) (Kelly, 1993; Barton, 2005). These characteristics of alternative schools appear at first glance to be effective learning principles, which the comprehensive school model would also benefit from, however, its position as the "stepchild of public education," only marginalizes its significance and "limits its effectiveness in engaging students most alienated by academic learning" (Kelly, 1993, p. xvi). Kelly's (1993) research and historical scope of continuation schools reveals that they have easily become a segregated "dumping ground" for rebellious, academically underprepared or deviant labeled youth:

"Unfortunately, educational policymakers have been content to provide a 'second chance' to those not well served by the mainstream without necessarily demanding that it be a better chance. Indeed continuation schools often offer diluted academic preparation and become stigmatized as second rate..." (p. xvi).

Since the 2008 financial crisis, national economic insecurities have exacerbated the rise of marginalized youth only to be met with decreases in public/private education funding and the availability of viable alternative programs. The federal government provides the majority of funding for continuation/alternative schools, but private funding is also used to finance a variety of second-chance programs operated by states and cities, community and faith-based organizations, and the non-profit sector (Barton, 2005). On a national scale, the survey documented the growth trend in alternative schools and programs over the decade. This survey also revealed that districts with more racial/ethnic minority and impoverished students were more likely to contain an alternative school or program. Districts with enrollments of 10,000 or more students tended to have three or more alternative schools or programs (Barton, 2005). Findings suggest that the specific purpose of alternative schools are defined by each state and implemented by each district, suggesting there really is no uniformity (Barton, 2005). Barton provides us with ongoing critical questions on the direction and purpose of alternative schools: What are the outcomes and expectations for students who attend these schools? And, if variation exists among schools and states as to what is intended, what is expected and what is provided?

Another important factor in understanding the outcomes and expectations across schools and programs was how students were referred or ended up in these alternatives. Students were often referred if "they are at risk of education failure, as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with early withdrawal from school"(Barton, 2005, p. 20). This over-reliance on alternative education for a diverse group of students who are "at-risk of education

failure," marks these learning sites as a place for the deficient. Kelly (1993) recognizes this practice and is critical of this overall trend--"by segregating rebels and failures from the mainstream high school, educators stigmatized them and the continuation program while easing their disciplinary load and scaring other students into relative conformity"(p. 66). Alternative Schools became a solution to students leaving without credentials as it was considered a "safety net" for students and a "safety valve" for districts (Kelly, 1993, Chapter 3). In asking the question, "who values the GED?" Thomas Smith (2003) provides a critical perspective on how institutions value the safety valve function of alternative schools and the GED:

"The GED serves as a systematic safety valve for a system with comparatively high drop-out rates. The GED program is a low-cost way to integrate hundreds of thousands of off-track individuals back into the mainstream of society, while at the same time providing an efficient means for the educational system to appear to meet its goals of equality of educational opportunity" (Smith, T, 2003, p. 375).

In applying the safety valve function to the proliferation of neoliberal policies in education, Tuck (2012) suggests the over-use of the GED serves to produce "uneven outcomes to high school diplomas and padding graduation rates of poorly performing school systems"(p.11). In her own analysis of second chance opportunity in New York City, Michelle Fine discusses the lack of responsibility these high schools have to students with whom they discharge:

"Public high schools "discharge" adolescents who are low income and who are minority-group members as though they bear no responsibility for what happens or doesn't happen next. They provide little to no information about the 'downside' of these alternatives, bolstering--through silence or support--the optimistic fictions of second chances, free training, guaranteed jobs, and glamorous world travel"(Fine, 1991, p.100).

If these continuation schools weren't devalued in some way, then they would be threatening to the social capital we invest in maintaining comprehensive schools. "Thus, at the organizational level, continuation schools may provide a safety valve--whether in response to demands for equal opportunity or class conflict--keeping the comprehensive schools pure while providing a second, yet devalued, chance to those who have been pushed out"(Kelly, 1993, p.30). This is not to say that young people are being duped into these programs, but as Eve Tuck (2012) suggests in her research with GED earners and seekers, these programs and credentials mean something to young people.

### **Valuing the GED as an Alternative Opportunity**

The General Educational Development (GED) credential, sponsored by the higher education lobbyist group, the American Council on Education (ACE) was originally established as an education evaluation tool for veterans returning after the war looking to enter the workforce and higher education (Tuck, 2012, p. 95). Not offered by the government, but rather, a privately run testing center, the battery exam is supported by private and public institutions and intended to represent an educational equivalent to the high school diploma (Barton, 2005, Tuck, 2012). "Institutions of higher education, employers, and the military are not compelled by anything beyond public perception to view the GED as an equivalent or legitimate alternative to the high school diploma"(Tuck, 2012, p.92)

GED trends have fluctuated since the early 1990's where 1 in 7 secondary school completion credentials granted nationwide was a GED, whereas, in the 2000's, the use of the GED increased nationwide to be 1 in 5 (Tuck, p. 93). Revisions to the GED were



made to address the growth in young adult seekers. Statistics from the American Council on Education have found, between the years of 1975 and 2000, earners were younger overall, specifically youth aged 19 and younger grew by 11 percent, while earners aged 25 and older fell by 8 percent (Tuck, 2010, p. 93). It has also been noted how revisions in the past decade were "attempts to better align GED earners to low-wage jobs rather than higher education," as the lobbyist group was influenced by corporate representatives attempting to connect the qualifications of GED earners with needs of employers (Tuck, 2012, 96). White GED candidates earn the GED at a greater percentage than their Black and Brown peers. Eve Tuck theorizes this trend as indicating a combination of factors; a bias in the test toward white normative culture, unequal access to quality test preparation or uneven quality of education received at the student's former schools (Tuck, 2012, p.94).

As an alternative credential to a high school diploma, the GED has been reported as having been statistically less efficient and holding little comparison to a high school diploma. "A high school diploma signifies that the bearer has both the cognitive and noncognitive attributes important for success in adulthood. It is usually a minimum requirement for engaging in further training and serves as the gatekeeper for higher education and high paying jobs"(National Research Council,2011, p.13). In entry-level, non-professional positions, the GED has become almost essential to gain access to employment and advance into post-secondary education institutions. At the same time, the economic earning power of a GED is still lower than a student graduating with a high school diploma. Empirical research on the GED earning potential has suggested that when considering education and employment outcomes, GED recipients statistically are

more similar to "dropouts" than to high school completers. In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education entitled "Educational and Labor Market Performance of GED Recipients," the department concluded that the "common practice of counting GEDs as high school graduates should be reconsidered"(Barton, 2005, p.31). Research policies on dropouts have come to similar conclusions given the material benefits of the GED diploma: "Although GED certification can be beneficial for many students, it has *less value* than a standard diploma as a tool for pursuing both education and employment"(National Research Council, 2001, p.28, see also Barton, 2005, Tuck, 2012). The distribution of the GED has been reduced to a mere status, a symbolic credential that may allow recipients entry but does not guarantee mobility.

Current perspectives on youth's value of the GED have created divergent discourse. The authors of the following report speak for the student and make broad and inaccurate assumptions of the student's capacity to understand the "choice" that is made in pursuing the GED, while also assuming that students are unaware of the qualitative difference economically and socially--"GED recipients do not realize the social and economic benefits that come with a high school diploma"(National Research Council, 2011, p.15). This statement relies on individual deficiencies rather than asking the question as to why the GED maintains a disingenuous presence as a mark of equivalency to the high school diploma. The GED will continue to be publicly perceived as a trivial and incompetent credential without critical youth perspectives, leaving us to "assume that the youth are being duped into making a fatalistic decision"(Tuck, 2012, p.109). Identifying youth perspectives on the GED and why there is "lesser value" structurally

can contribute to our understanding of how students who leave school are confronted with institutional and socio-cultural barriers.

The recent scholarship by Eve Tuck (2012), entitled "Urban Youth and School Pushout," highlights the significance of the GED as both a barrier and opportunity for young people who have left high school without a diploma credential. Tuck's findings, situated in the context of New York City, investigates the value and use of the GED as it is understood by youth who have obtained or are in the process of receiving the GED, what she calls earners and seekers, respectively. Tuck's position is to recognize the diminished value of the GED, challenge this notion and highlight its worth by honoring young people's reasons for why they think it's valuable.

"Youth value the GED in ways formerly unobserved by analyses that focus on higher-education-use and use for employment...they valued the GED for a range of reasons, most notably because it has provided them a sense of accomplishment and completion, and was an emergency exit from inadequate schools. Youth also praised their GED programs for being flexible, dynamic, and supportive in ways that their schools were not"(Tuck, 2012:146)

Tuck's major contribution is in her eye for including youth perspectives on the GED, implying a new value system for the GED. The value is in the "moment of completion in a system determined to ensure your failure, crossing of the finish line after a life-time of being tripped up, it is an act of hope, of desire, of repatriation"(2012, p.109). This crucial insight challenges our predisposition to associate GED value in economic or material forms, and instead shines a light on how youth align value with how achievement supports their humanity. It is the lag of this devaluation narrative of the GED that Tuck sites as being a contributing factor to the GED negative public perception. "Existing narratives of the GED, because they are focused on the marketability of the GED earners

and not the *lived* value of the credential, are borne of and contribute to societal conditions that stigmatize the GED and GED earners"(Tuck, 2012, p.101).

The ethnographic research conducted by Dei et al. (1997), highlighted the voices of students who were able to articulate an experience on the periphery that critically engaged the extended process of disengagement and illustrates the need for a viable "safety nets:"

"For actual dropouts, the years (or months) of experience after leaving school had put a different "spin" on the meanings and interpretations they gave to the term "dropout." Dropouts tended to discuss dropping out as a personal loss - as a decision which had resulted in lost time, lost chances, and/or lost status in society...Yet dropouts tended not to blame themselves for dropping out and still maintained that their decision made sense at the time"(Dei et al., 1997, p.54).

With these ethnographic narratives, we are reminded that the experience of the "dropout" does not end when the act or event of leaving complete. The need for "expanded, multiple meaningful routes to graduation," and viable safety nets for students is the argument for keeping the GED around and for improving the overall opportunity (be it social or material) that alternative learning sites and the GED have unofficially represented for youth (Tuck, 2012, p.117).

The purpose of this study is to critically investigate the punitive patterns that exist in the "second chance" opportunity structure experienced by these four young men who had been placed-out of schools in Worcester, MA. In conducting a critical ethnography, the perspectives of youth marginalized by race and class who had left a Worcester comprehensive high school without a diploma became the foundation for my critical inquiry. This research looks to understand how the process of school leaving, the label of "dropout," and the pursuit of second-chance opportunity are connected and exercise

forms of punishment that have clear messages about the worth of these young men's aspirations and the investing value of fostering support for their opportunities.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Developing a Conceptual Frame**

In discussing my research methods, I find it necessary to be reflective and consider the influences and decisions that shaped my research as a whole. My questions came out of believing there was more to know than what was told to me in stereotypes and meritocratic discourse. I was concerned with how young people navigated and found pathways to building their lives outside of the normative education trajectory. Although their high school experiences were important to understanding the life after high school, it was of lesser importance compared to what channels were sought out after leaving. My research questions were cultivated in a determination to grasp larger meanings, understand the lived realities of these youth and to provide critical insight to local perspectives. In this way, my personal interests developed into a conceptual framework that placed significant emphasis on the necessity for youth perspectives on the issues at hand.

In the case of this research, social justice issues have always been my concern over and above an analysis of the literature as the guiding principal to my critical inquiries (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p.11). I built my conceptual framework under an integrated approach illustrated by Ravitch and Riggan's notion of a conceptual framework as "an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous (2012, p.7). My framework was constructed by integrating researcher disposition, interest, and positionality, literature, theory and methods (2012, p.6). I argue that this study is significant to preexisting and

emerging conceptual and theoretical perspectives on "dropouts" because it contributes a critical perspective on school miseducation practices, alternative learning policy implications and social disadvantage issues. As a researcher, I ground myself in building a socially aware and relevant analytic inquiry. Activist anthropology, as both a fluid position and a map, frames the critical approach I take in understanding social issues from multiple points that can provide clarity to multiple solutions. Recognizing diverse positions in an egalitarian fashion supports resolutions towards the issues that challenge our pursuits towards a more equitable and socially just society. Without an approach that includes a diverse holistic frame, we will continue to make well intentioned efforts towards progressive change without understanding the implications of current realities and problems. Learning from youth marginalized within the opportunity structure provided insightful analysis from those situated to see, feel, and experience intersections of injustice. (Site authors of activist anthropology and social justice.)

In order to investigate and critique the system of second chance alternative learning sites in Worcester, MA, I chose a critical ethnography as being the most constructive methodological frame to answer these research questions. Interviews with four participants and observations supported by document analysis were included to provide a more holistic critical analysis in understanding the particularities of this education system and experiences with access to opportunity. Ultimately, it became essential to use the narrative as the analytic center in understanding the opportunity structure in Worcester, MA. The discussion that ensued in these interviews reflected on past lived experiences, current realities, and future outlooks to support the narrative frame. In their narratives are the descriptions of places, people and routes taken in their

experiences with education as they located opportunity in diverse learning sites across the city. My primary theoretical objective with this work is to complicate previously understood notions of "dropout" and "second-chance" opportunity discourse. In highlighting narratives that support a critical structural analysis, I illustrate a perspective that includes interpersonal relations and emotional impact of the opportunity structure. My intention is to bridge a local context from the critical perspectives of these youth with a thoughtful analysis and inquiry about our society in order to explore deeper and more proactive solutions to educational injustices.

### **Critical Ethnography**

In their Epilogue, "Writing the 'Wrongs' of Fieldwork: Confronting our own Research/Writing Dilemmas in Urban Ethnography," Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (1998) speak on the responsibilities of socially engaged scholarly work involving marginalized communities. I agree with their assertions that we must be careful of the "artificial and dangerous dichotomy" of positioning individuals as wholly victims *or* resilient. To me, these narratives represent the lives of people in the struggle, a dialectic of survival and dignity, or as Fine and Weis suggest, "the endurance of structures of injustice and the powerful acts of agency" (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 286). Acknowledging act of agency, the ability of individuals to make choices and shape their experiences as to not be completely determined by structures (Castagno, 2012), was central to my incorporation of youth perspectives. Instead of pointing solely to individual choices, behaviors and circumstances as they are experienced and extended to the problem with "dropouts," a critical ethnography looks to also incorporate as central to the analysis an



emphasis on the structure and cultural behaviors of society. A critical ethnography illustrates how systems of power and structures of privilege and power are experienced at the local level. Castagno (2012) defines a critical ethnography as "a form of research that attempts to account for and highlight the complex relationship between structural constraints on human action and autonomous, active agency by individuals and groups" (Castagno, 2012, p. 374). A critical ethnography must illuminate both structure and agency and must be in both data and analysis. It is sound ethnography to analyze how structures operate and condition the options available to individuals. In this same vein, it is necessary to illustrate how individuals are not completely constrained and how actions and decisions are not always determined by structures (Castagno, 2012).

This study followed an ethnographic analysis, an iterative process that evolved at multiple points. Considerable attention was given to the evolution of data, from the lived experiences of the researcher and the initial questions to the integration of interviews and participant observations in the current field site. Considerable reflection was given on the role of supplemental data in creating and framing a larger substantive argument that supported, first and foremost, the lived realities and experiences of those interviewed participants (O'Reilly, 2009). I engaged in a reflective process throughout the research, as I revised the conceptual framework to be more precise and more meaningful in its relationship to the participants, current research and emergent social issues. I made clear to be reflexive about my assumptions and the theoretical commitments I had entering this project. I was critical about my "reflexive/dialectical interplay between theory and data" as this process shaped my perceptions of the social issues and the participant's perspectives (Emerson, et al., 2011, p. 198). In this way, I was able to organize my data

collections with a more meaningful approach that would clarify and justify the need for these critical inquiries and analysis (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012).

My strongest contribution with this research is in emphasizing the links being made between structures and interpersonal relationships. This conceptual frame, supported by an ethno-methodological approach required the use of diverse methods for seeking to understand the issue at hand. The contextual analysis required to understand the scope of the problem involved analysis of public and district documents on Worcester, MA. The following contextual inclusion was integral to supporting the recorded data involved in interviews and participant observations.

#### **Worcester, MA: "The Heart of the Commonwealth"**

The research in this study was conducted in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts, New England's second largest city, behind Boston, Massachusetts with a population just over 180,000 based on the 2010 census count (Worcester Regional Research Bureau (WRRB), 2013, p.3). The racial/ethnic makeup of the city has changed in the past 10 years--"The number of people who identify as white has decreased by 5.57% while the number of people who identify as African American has increased by more than 77%...the Latino population has increased by almost 45%"(WRRB, 2013, p. 5). The city itself is a young populated city, with just over 50% of its population under the age of 35. The 2010 unemployment rate estimated for ages 16-19 has been recorded at 26.3% and for ages 20-24 at 14%, as compared to a citywide unemployment rate of 8.9% (WRRB, 2013, p.14). The late 1800's to mid 1900's positioned Worcester as a booming sector of industrial commerce in New England. The portrait of jobs in Worcester has gone through

another shift in the past decade as the post-industrial economy has changed the face of many of our nation's cities. Between 2001 and 2011, good-producing jobs decreased by 32.68%, a loss of 4,796 jobs, in such sectors as construction and manufacturing. While service providing jobs in education and health services increased by almost 20%, a total of 7,138 jobs (WRRB, 2014, p.4). The Colleges of the Worcester Consortium, a collective of twelve colleges and universities within and surrounding the City, reported an enrollment of more than 35,000 students (WRRB, 2013, p.11). Overall, Worcester's young population is one of the most educated among New England's largest cities.

This site was chosen for two primary reasons. First, I myself have a personal relationship with this city. It being the place of my birth, this city has always held a particular relation to me as being the "city" to the "country" I grew up in. For 10 months prior to the beginning of this research endeavor, I was employed at a nonprofit in Worcester that served young people who had left high school. I sought out this particular nonprofit as an opportunity for myself to engage in critical work in helping guide youth through their experiences with education, work, life skills and leadership. Second, the motivation and inspiration of this project came from the lives of young people I had met during that time in Worcester. Their involvements with the nonprofit exposed me to detailed and critical frames of a "dropout" student experience. I understood at deeply personal levels the implications of structural constraints, what I interpreted as "limited opportunity," and the agency's promise toward building opportunity. Coming back to this place to conduct research was an important exploration of my own experiences as being a privileged member of this community, as I came and went everyday to work in a city I did not identify as my home. I also saw it as an important return to understanding the

context of my student's lives that I felt I was privileged to learn from in such intimate ways for ten months.

*Mapping Opportunity in Worcester.* Based on research conducted on education inequalities in the Northeast, Black and Latino students are found to be over-represented in high poverty schools and experience heavy racial isolation (Orfield and Lee, 2005, p. 29). "Racially isolated and economically poor neighborhoods restrict employment options for young people, contribute to poor health, expose children to extremely high rates of crime and violence, and house some of the least-performing schools"(Kirwan Institute, 2009, p.7). A context specific, rather than context neutral mindset to thinking about the education inequities of Worcester is important when understanding opportunity that is embedded in a particular place. Focusing on contextual factors, both broad and local, addresses how opportunity structures and realities are shaped (Milner,2012, p.709).

Opportunity Mapping, a research tool designed by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University, aids us in understanding the dynamics of "opportunity" in a socio-geographic context analysis. The Institute defines their purpose to be a mapping tool that illustrates where opportunity rich communities exist and who has access to these communities (Kirwan Institute, 2009). They also work to understand what needs to be remedied in opportunity poor communities. Opportunity in this study is defined as "environmental conditions or resources that are conducive to healthier, vibrant communities and are more likely to be conducive to helping residents in a community succeed"(Kirwan Institute, 2009:11). Opportunity Mapping helps us to see how residents of a certain area are situated within "an interconnected web of

opportunities that shape their quality of life" to form a "geography of opportunity"(Kirwan Institute, 2009).

As a research tool, this mapping uses data taken from the 2000 census and re-aggregated non-census based data from well developed indicators of opportunity impediments and conduits (Kirwan Institute, 2009). To highlight the significant link between neighborhoods and access to available social, political, and economic opportunities, the Kirwan Institute uses nineteen indicators of opportunity to assess opportunity zones in a combined score across three different opportunity areas (educational opportunity (i.e. dropout rate/graduation rate), economic opportunity (i.e. unemployment rates, job trends) and neighborhood/housing quality (i.e. neighborhood poverty rate, home ownership rate)). Looking closely at the results on Central Massachusetts, I focused in on the City of Worcester and its surrounding townships. The townships surrounding the city of Worcester illustrate different zones of opportunity from those located within the city confines. A majority of the surrounding townships have high to very high opportunity, whereas the City of Worcester is shaded mostly as a low-opportunity zone, with the exception of two key areas. The northeast isolated sector known locally as the Great Brook Valley housing project, and the downtown region, known locally as Main South, that runs west along the Interstate 290 canal, as two areas that have been distinguished as very-low opportunity zones. The Kirwan Institute's findings suggest the isolation and density of communities of color correlates with the lowest opportunity zones in the area. This trend extended statewide, with findings that revealed more than 90% of African-American and Latino households were isolated in the lowest opportunity neighborhoods across the state. The institute concluded that racial

isolation was more pronounced than class-based segregation across the state. These maps depict the opportunity structure through aggregate numbers and census data, however, it does not represent the lived realities of this space and its access to opportunity for those that live within the City. It only takes a drive in this region to see the disparate representations that this mapping speaks to. The local knowledge and discourse provided in my research study speaks directly to these inequities as they are commonly understood by those who live, work or play in this region.

*The Scope of Worcester Public Schools.* There are four comprehensive high schools within the region, to the northwest border is Doherty Memorial High School, to the northeast is Burncoat Senior High School, to the southeast is North High School, and to the southwest is South Community High School. At the time this field research began in the winter of 2013, the most current data was from the academic year, 2011-2012. Total enrollment for the four comprehensive high schools was reported at 4,877 students (Department of Education (DOE), 2013). Student academic performance is said to be impacted by student attendance enough to claim the need to record student attendance measures. In the 2008-09 academic year, the district high school students' attendance rate was 91.5%. The lowest among students were in Worcester's four comprehensive high schools, with the average number of absences per student ranging from 13.7 to 17.4 days in 2008-09 (WRRB, 2010, p.4). This computes to an average of 3 weeks of school a year.

Based on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, Worcester school district is required to demonstrate schools are making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) in ELA, math, or both. These determinations are based on a combination of factors: student attendance, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) participation and

performance, and improvement over time. Schools that don't meet expectations in the aggregate or in any subgroup face incremented consequences for not making AYP standards. In 2010, all four of Worcester's comprehensive high schools (and four middle schools) were implementing restructuring plans. A restructuring status is the consequence of four years of failure to meet AYP determinations, requiring schools to "develop and implement a plan for fundamental reforms" (WRRB, 2010, p.17). The NCLB Act now required districts to report their graduation rates, the percentage of students who earn a high school diploma in four years. This ultimately required its inverse, the reporting of non-completion rates and dropout rates. The Department of Education requires districts to calculate the dropout rate as a percentage of students with whom the district is unable to determine if the student re-enrolled in another district. "Students are not counted as "on-time" graduates if they have either dropped out, have not passed the MCAS exam, are still enrolled in school, have been expelled, or obtained a GED instead of a regular diploma" (WRRB, 2010).

A few changes over the decade have resulted in a wider net being cast to account for students leaving high school without a diploma from Massachusetts schools. In 2001-02, the State began to account for summer school students that did not enroll by Oct. 1st, where it had not before. In the 2005-2006 academic year, the Massachusetts DOE began to cross-reference district data measures with the General Educational Development (GED) testing service database. Up to this point, the Department relied on district notification about students who received their GED, suggesting many districts let students slip through the cracks and use such categories as "dropout-status unknown." This statement put out by the Department reifies our understanding of how the State

views both GED earners and diploma earners as "completers." "As a result, the Department more accurately tracks students who drop out of high school and then earn a GED therefore decreasing the number of students who are considered final dropouts"(DOE, 2013). What is considered a "final dropout"? Counting GED earners as completers for the district could mean covering up large discrepancies in the number of students who receive an inadequate quality of education and whose economic opportunities are impacted differently. In 2006-07, students who intended to transfer to another in-state public school and did not reenroll were now being considered as "dropouts," whereas before, if they left the district they were no longer accounted for.

On a State level, the total number of dropouts in 2011-12 was approximately 7,051 students. Table 1 on page 61 illustrates the State Annual Dropout Data by Race/Ethnicity and Gender for the 2011-2012 academic year. DOE (2013) calculated that males make up 59.3% of the overall number of high school dropouts. Black male students accounted for 708 of the students dropping out, making up 10% of the total number of dropouts statewide. White male students accounted for 1,800 of the students dropping out, making up 25.5% of the total number of dropouts. These numbers may indicate that in this year there were more white student dropouts than black student dropouts, however, if we assess the annual dropout rate, black male students were dropping out at a rate of 5.4% as compared to the annual dropout rate for white male students at 1.8%. When we factor in the Hispanic population, with an annual rate of 6.8%, making up 20.2% of all dropouts, you can see the significant distribution of "dropouts" coming from Black or Brown communities. Statewide trends indicate urban schools have a higher



percentage of dropouts where the majority of students come from low-income households.

Table 2 on page 61 illustrates the high school dropout numbers and percentages for Worcester Schools over a five year span from 2004-05 to 2008-09. The five years include the years the four participants of this study were attending high school and consequentially moved out. The "number" column reflects a numerical count of total dropouts, whereas the "percent" column reflects the ratio of dropouts to the total school population. This chart makes significant how the percentage year to year may fluctuate, but what becomes more significant here is the number of young people out of schools. The total number of students classified as "dropouts" leaving the four comprehensive schools each year is of considerable importance when over five academic years; Doherty let go of 313 students, North let go of 380 students, Burncoat let go of 438 students, and South let go of 487 students. According to this data report, the four comprehensive Worcester Public High Schools let go of 1,618 students over these five years.

Statewide, students in 2011-12 were organized into dropout categories that accounted for student transfers with no re-enrollment (1,326), enrolling in a non-diploma granting adult education program (1,235), entering JobCorps (211), entering military (3), incarceration (52), left due to employment (153), confirmed dropout- plans unknown (2,090), and student's status/location unknown(1,981)(DOE, 2013). In 2011-12, WPS saw a total of 252 additional students being released from the comprehensive high schools: Doherty with 50 students at a rate of 3.8%, North with 79 students at a rate of 6.6%, Burncoat with 45 students at a rate of 4.4%, and South with 78 students at a rate of 5.8% (DOE, 2013). However, comprehensive research on district accounts of "dropout"

students for the 2011-12 academic year confirmed partiality in categorization that may reveal discrepancies in total counts. For a selective breakdown of WPS district classifications of "dropouts" and other transfers, see Appendix A and Discussion chapter for a breakdown on implications. Given the established research on changes to dropout categories, inconsistencies in data collection and the possibility of manipulation of outcomes to meet accountability measures, we have reason to believe these numbers to be estimates, and low ones at that.

Alternative education in Massachusetts is an instructional approach under the jurisdiction of each public school committee, may either be in the form of a program within a school or as a separate school itself. The alternative education is offered to "at-risk" students in a nontraditional setting. "At-risk" students who may benefit from alternative education were defined as "students who are pregnant/parenting teens, truant students, and suspended/expelled students, returned dropouts, delinquent youth, or other students' who are not meeting local promotional requirements" (DOE, 2012). An exception of alternative education was the General Educational Development (GED).

Table 1: Annual State Dropout Data by Race/Ethnicity and Gender: 2011-12						
Race/Ethnicity	Gender	HS Enrollment	Percent of HS Enrollment	Number of Dropouts	Annual Dropout Rate	Percent of all Dropouts
Black	Male	12,987	4.5%	708	5.4%	10.0%
Hispanic	Male	21,048	7.3%	1,426	6.8%	20.2%
White	Male	100,864	35.1%	1,800	1.8%	25.5%
Adapted from High School Dropouts 2011-12: Massachusetts Public Schools www.doe.mass.edu (2013)						

Table 2: High School Dropouts, Worcester Public Schools Over Five Academic Terms										
	2004-05		2005-06		2006-07		2007-08		2008-09	
School	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Doherty Memorial High School	64	4.2%	67	4.3%	76	4.9%	44	2.9%	62	4.2%
North High School	97	7.6%	61	4.9%	84	7.0%	70	6.1%	68	6.1%
Burncoat Senior High School	79	5.6%	71	5.0%	100	7.3%	102	8.0%	86	7.1%
South Community High School	103	6.8%	82	5.3%	117	8.2%	76	5.4%	109	7.6%
Data Source: MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Adapted from Worcester Research Bureau, <i>Benchmarking Public Education in Worcester: 2010</i> , p.5										

## **Design of Interviews**

This study took on a small scale methodological approach to locate detailed accounts of the lived experiences, perceptions and conceptions of "dropouts" and opportunity in Worcester, MA. Often small scale studies are seen as limiting in their ability to provide reliable accounts of a lived experience, here, the cross sections of the interviews were closely correlated for common themes and trends to make up for those possible limitations. The perspectives provided were meant to highlight key patterns and insights to thinking critically about education opportunity gaps and solutions. These four interviewees were supplemented with researcher observations, within the field, and from prior knowledge and experience of Worcester and education circuits. I was reflective of how this prior knowledge changed the scope of my research and caused significant shifts in the evolution of the research project.

*Recruitment.* I sought out research participants through a snowball sampling approach, beginning with young people who I had met while working in Worcester. My time in the field recruiting participants yielded four young men to interview about their experiences with leaving high school, their livelihoods after leaving, and their notions of opportunity living in Worcester. Three of the four participants were acquaintances I had met while working in Worcester. The other I encountered as an acquaintance of one of the participants. This allowed for biased access, but given the short recruitment time frame in the field, a large participant pool was not realistic.

Reflecting on my positionality and my role in co-constructing reality (Castagno, 2012, p. 381), I saw the importance of my previous relationships with some of my participants. In acknowledging my access to these conversations and insights based on

the relationships I'd formed years prior, I recognized my relative privilege to their stories and, therefore, my responsibilities. It is my intention with this research to write the narratives in an authentic and critical way that serves the communities involved, adds to critical theory and is applicable to public policy (Fine & Weis, 1998, p. 273). To me, these students were already active agents in their pursuit of opportunity. Being a young person among other young people helped to bridge our differences, and allowed for trust and comfort to come easily. However, my position as a student among students, but of qualitative difference, came up in my interviews as I was symbolic of a commitment to education. I do believe that being open about my education credentials and the pursuit of my research might have had some influence on their perception of what I might have wanted to hear about education. For some of the participants, our previous relationships may have helped ease this perception.

*Participants.* Experiences that made these participants eligible for the study began with four criteria. Participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 25, residents of the City of Worcester, had to have attended Worcester Public High Schools, and had to have left school without a diploma. Pseudonyms were used for participant names to protect the confidentiality and privacy of these four young men. Pseudonyms were also used for names of the alternative learning sites and comprehensive schools when they were associated with participants in order to further protect the integrity and confidentiality of the research. However, for the purpose of identifying data specific to the district, original names were retained for contextual and descriptive purposes. The participants of the study are as follows:

Marcus is a 21-year-old male who identifies as African American. He attended Archer High School from 2007 to 2010. Marcus attended GED classes at Sparrow Center and Foster Grow, a nonprofit program where he earned his GED in 2010. Marcus is currently unemployed-looking for work and lives with his Mother (45, employed as a CNA), and his Sister (19, Employed).

Terrence is a 24-year-old male who identifies as African American. He attended Clover Valley High School from 2005 to 2007. Terrence attended Alternative Course Education School (ACES) and WorkUnited, a job skills government-funded program. He earned his high school diploma from one of these two alternative learning sites, however, not specified. Terrence is currently unemployed-looking for work. He did not include specifics on his household.

Daryn is a 20-year-old male who identifies as Black. He attended Badger High School for two years and Dodge Ridge High School for one year. Daryn attended Park View Behavioral School, WorkUnited and FosterGrow. At the time of this interview, Daryn was studying towards completion of a GED and in search of programs able to grant him a high school diploma. He is currently employed part-time at a community center and is currently living with his Mother (39, Employed) and his Sister (18, a first-year-student in college).

Oscar is a 25-year-old male who identifies as African American. He attended Archer High School for three years. Oscar attended WorkUnited, Young Achievers, a skills improvement program, Sparrow Center and FosterGrow. He earned his GED through his enrollment in FosterGrow in 2010. He is currently employed part-time and living with his Girlfriend (24, Unemployed) and his Daughter (newborn).

Apart from the eligibility criteria, the four participants were found to share other commonalities. All the participants had some experience with discipline or attendance conflicts with their previous high schools, had at one point or another sought out alternative degrees and had attended multiple alternative schools or programs in the region.

*Interviews.* I met with participants during the month of February, 2013. The 90-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded confidentially in the

downtown public library in private conference rooms. Daryn and Oscar each had individual interviews, whereas Marcus and Terrence had a joint interview due to unforeseen research complications and a need to respect the time of my participants. I traveled with participants walking downtown, driving through their neighborhoods, meeting up at the library and taking them home after our talks. These informal conversations while walking the city and driving them across town were influential in understanding additional context as the participants would often describe their neighborhoods, talk about their current struggles, and interact with people they knew.

The interview scripts were derived from a lengthy list of questions that centered on three core themes: experiences with dropping out/of being a dropout; characteristics of the opportunity structure in Worcester, including its schools and job economy; and value-based perspectives of success, opportunity and education. The interviews were conducted as an interactive process that allowed for some questions to become insignificant, while others introduced from the participants themselves. During the interviews I stressed fluidity between knowers and learners as we discussed their schools, the city of Worcester, and their scope of opportunity. In my conception of this study, my hope was to make my participants part of the process as co-researchers, co-constructors of knowledge (Tuck, 2012, Chapter 1). Together we discussed the geography of Worcester and analyzed the district dropout rates. We were building an understanding of why these dropout practices were occurring, introducing critical analysis and considerations together. I was also reflexive about retaining the integrity of my interviews throughout the process, from initial recruitment, to transcribing their interviews, to organizing their ideas into a conceptual frame.

*Coding process.* I personally transcribed the five hours of interview recordings and was reengaged with the participant stories about school, their city and opportunity. After fully transcribing the interviews, I read through all the transcripts and wrote short notations to each of the lines to begin naming themes and topics. Sorting data into coherent categories took many iterations and evolvments throughout the process. A more focused feminist-centered coding that involved reading the feelings expressed in each of the participants quotes yielded more specific analysis that resulted in the final versions of thematic analysis. The final thematic organization was constructed around two major thematic poles: (1) high school experiences that led to leaving school and (2) experiences after leaving, including pursuing opportunity in alternative learning sites. Sub-themes to these two core frames were overlapping and interrelating, and organized around a few common themes (Emerson et al., 2011): dropout/pushout definitions, construction of labels, punitive experiences with schooling, second chance discourse, opportunity defined in alternative learning sites, support/motivation, stigma/stereotypes, and education/job attainment.



## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Part I: Leaving High School**

*"They'd call me a dropout in a heartbeat" -Marcus*

Years prior, while working in the nonprofit designed to support students who had left high school, I had an encounter with a student that significantly shaped this research inquiry. I had generalized the group of students I was talking to by calling them "dropouts". When a student called me out on my mistake, he claimed, "I'm not a dropout, because I didn't drop out". This statement struck me because it made clear the limits of the term "dropout," and I always wondered; if he didn't identify as a dropout then what experiences led him to be so against this labeled identity? And what did "dropout" mean if it didn't mean someone like him? These questions defined my research and the respectful approach I would take to allow for these young people to explain and name what happened to them.

The experiences in school and what led to leaving are important to include in framing the positions of these four participants because it provides context to their actions, perceptions and choices *after* leaving high school. The experiences in their high schools are important reflections, but not the sole focus of this inquiry. The "post-leaving" experience is necessary to investigate what opportunities for development are made available for and by students. How "dropouts" are defined is rooted here in the experiential definitions and perception of these four young men who are classified by institutions and society as such. Their definitions point to their own experiences of

disengagement in school and in the leaving process that reveals patterns of a punitive environment. In thinking about how leaving school is a process, the metaphor of walking and a step forward/back/side resembles how these four young men identify with feeling responsible to a trajectory, an unfinished path, and how for them, schooling and earning a credential is attached to their identity.

### **"I'm not a dropout:" Definitions and Alternative Perspectives**

Marcus' above quote reveals the presence of a label that can be placed on students, a label not necessarily adopted by the students themselves. The antagonism Marcus articulates here creates an "us versus them" position that places Marcus in as subordinate to a system of power that is unnamable. His use of "they" is both broad and specific, as the "they" is an ambiguous entity, yet can represent the social control agents and institutions Marcus encountered. These combined factors of the interpersonal and the structural collectively represent what Rios (2011) refers to as the youth control complex. For a student like Marcus, the label means something to his identity and its consequential weight on his future opportunity. In order to understand the label itself, I found it best to begin with interpretations from Marcus, Terrence, Daryn and Oscar. How do these young men describe their definitions and perceptions of "dropouts"? I found that many of the definitions and perceptions tied back to their experiences and were based in the exiting and post-exiting choices and forces that they were presented with. I asked Marcus how he defined dropout and if he thought it applied to him:

Marcus: I'm not a dropout; I don't consider myself a dropout once again. I consider myself--Not a dropout, I don't even got a definition. I don't even got a word for it yet, but, I'm not a dropout.

Marcus' position is important here because it highlights the significance of labels and his intentional expelling of that label. As the opening statement reminds us, it is not Marcus himself that chose the label, but rather something that is placed upon an individual, as quickly as a heartbeat, regardless of their own acceptance. Marcus describes how he is left without a definition for his experience, without a name for what happened to him. The way in which he doesn't align himself or put boundaries around his identity as a "dropout" marks the nuance in his experience with leaving school and suggests a critical lens to our definitions and conceptions of what a "dropout" is.

I asked the four participants to share their thoughts on the definition of "dropout" and its commonly held interpretation as a person who leaves school without a diploma. Oscar described what the word meant to him: "People that leave school? I feel like its people that gave up on stuff, just gave up on their own opportunities. That's how I see it". Oscar's definition is not too far outside of what is stereotypically defined as a "dropout," as a student who chooses to disengage themselves from school. Defining someone who leaves school as somebody who gives up is a typical response that fits the discourse on "dropouts." However, what is nuanced about Oscar's response is his how he explains this "giving up". A student who "gave up on their own opportunities" frames the individual with not only a responsibility, but according to Oscar, sees the individual as letting go of the opportunities for their life, an ultimate giving up on themselves. In answering the question of what they thought of the word "dropout," Marcus and Terrence have their own insight on what it means to give up on opportunities and emphasizes what you do after leaving as being important to the definition.

Marcus: Dropout is somebody that's got no education, like none.

Terrence: Dropped out and didn't do anything after

Marcus: Exactly, like 20 something with like five kids, no job, not doing nothing for you. You know, that's a dropout to me. I'm still young, I could-I got my GED, I could go to college, and then what are you going to call me? A college dropout? A college dropout college, you know what I mean? What are you gonna call me after that? So like a dropout is somebody that's not doing nothing with their life. That's how I look at it.

Terrence: I think the regular term for it, I think the minute you even like mess up on your schooling, doesn't it like label you with that? The minute you like drop out of school, I mean whether you still will get it or not, doesn't that kinda still make you like one?

They too are in agreement with Oscar in how a "dropout" is someone who is doing nothing for themselves. Although their definition is riddled with the gendered and classed stereotypes of an irresponsible young man with a family and no way to take care of them, it is the greater offense, the lack of direction and purpose, they point to that signifies the label itself is a negative one in an era of personal responsibility. Terrence gives the normative institutional definition of "dropout" that assumes once you leave school, or mess up the normative trajectory of schooling, as he says, regardless of whether you go on to get a high school diploma or GED, that it *still* labels you as a "dropout." The line of questioning Terrence spoke to is what's wrong with the normative definition and labels of "dropouts". What he describes as a break in schooling, the institution and societal norms mark a student with the stigmatized label without considering the context behind why and how the student left. Terrence makes a very important point in his questioning, that when you mess up on your schooling, despite the situational circumstances, the label exists as a marker of difference.

Which leads us to the question Marcus has pointed out, when will the label of "dropout" disappear? His statement points to the insignificance of the accumulation of labels while also suggesting its use as an ubiquitous practice. Marcus questions whether the accumulation of credentials and attachments to places of higher learning will erase the label from your prior experiences with schooling institutions. His line of questioning also signifies how education can be an important mechanism, not only for economic mobility, but for social mobility out of a labeled identity. These questions are relevant to Marcus who exists in a contextual reality that sees how the completion of school through obtaining your GED doesn't evade the label of "dropout" or necessarily change his circumstances.

These are all important considerations in thinking about not only the definition of "dropout," but the social production of labels as it continues to follow these students into higher education and employment opportunities. Daryn too was able to articulate education as being the distinct difference between "dropouts" and people who just leave school:

Daryn: There's like a big difference between that. Dropouts are people who like, literally drop out and don't do nothing. And like they just work continuously, like GED or high school diploma don't even matter to them anymore, that's a dropout to me. 'Cause I didn't sign no paper to drop out or anything, I just stopped going to school, that's it. Other than that, if you just stop going to school, but still trying to get your things, I wouldn't consider that a dropout, I would consider it time off to get back on schedule after a while.

Daryn's final statement adds an alternative lens and confirms what has been noted in research on the spectrum of experience and attitudes of students involved in the process

of school leaving. For Daryn, an alternative path to getting the education he needs exists as long as the trajectory of pursuing education is still intact. "Stop going to school" or "taking time off" to him was not dropping-out, but rather, allowing time to do *something* over nothing. In Marcus' definition of dropouts he also explained the diversity of experience by giving credible authority to reasons for why students leave:

Marcus: Financial, some people just prefer to work than go to school. Like some people have a different mindset, 'oh like why go to school when I can make money right now, and work hard at working at this and furthering,' you know what I mean? 'Do whatever I'm doing, then go to school, then doing that for a couple years later.' I'm a step back or I might be a step forward. Everybody got their own, oversight of it.

In describing a path from work to returning to school, Marcus speaks to a critical part of student's process with school leaving. Marcus' insight on directionality and it being a step back or a step forward is important here as it individualizes the experiences and circumstances that cause an individual to leave school. Stretching Marcus' conception of directionality to be both a step back *and* a step forward can allow for leaving to be seen as not necessarily either a good or bad thing, but to be both positive *and* negative as it considers the full context and extent of circumstances involved in the process. Oscar understands this point more so as his life is representative of this both/and construction. He explains in contextual examples that hint to his own experiences. Oscar complicates his original definition of a "dropout" as someone who gave up on their own opportunities, as he thinks through how he feels about the word "dropout":

Oscar: I don't know, dropouts to me mean other things. You could have a hard time with school, something happened like that. Then there's other people who just don't want to go to school and those are the people who just gave up on themselves. Then there's other people that I just felt like they is been left behind. That's how I feel when I hear dropout...I feel like

I left to do something different, but I just feel like there was just too many obstacles. I would never be able--I would never see myself overcoming.

Oscar speaks to the diversity of experience and makes distinctions between what he sees as multiple perspectives to a “dropout”. His first type illustrates that the school environment created the conditions to leave. Those students who had a hard time in school is an example of his own story as he explained his leaving was because of the weight of the obstacles being unbearable. He elaborates on his original definition in the second type, as being those that don’t want to go to school, who he believes are the ones who gave up on their own opportunities. He frames a third type as the students that had “been left behind,” where schools gave up on the opportunity for their students by leaving them behind. His story as someone who could no longer bear the obstacles and chose to move along a different path is significant to the process of leaving being both a good *and* bad outcome. Dei et. al (1997) use ethnographic narratives to understand the diverse vantage points that the four participants have contributed as a more comprehensive understanding of the definition and meaning of "dropout". In their study, student participants were asked open-ended questions such as; "define drop-out" or "why do students drop out of school". In this questioning process, Dei et al. were able to uncover the ideologies at work that were used in framing a student's understanding of why some students dropped out. The ideologies represented the spectrum of experience, some recognized the barriers and realities of the unequal social structure (and racial discrimination), while others credited it to individual weakness and the ideologies of meritocracy (Dei et al., p. 50). The heterogeneous experience of school leaving was found in the diverse constructions of the word "dropout."

Reflecting on Marcus, Terrence, Daryn and Oscar's definitions of "dropouts" it appeared that everyone's definition was framed as being something in which they are not. The definitions they give of "dropouts" paints a clear picture of a person with no ambition, no direction, no path; illustrated by Marcus' metaphor, "If you ain't walking, then where are you walking to?". We must consider the importance of how these young people are claiming that they are not the negative label that is associated with lack of education, direction and desire for self-improvement. While defining "dropout," they expel the definition and stereotypes by distinguishing themselves apart from their own definitions and point to the complexity of experience that is part of being a student exiled from school. These multiple terms and identities are perplexing and shifting across participants and across moments in the process, illustrating fluidity in the social construction of "dropout," challenging our normative understandings of the label. What these four young men claim sets them apart from the stereotyped "dropout" is that they are continuing with their education and futures despite leaving.

### **Punitive Process of Disengagement**

The following analysis looks to provide context for how these four students found themselves out of high school, illustrative of examples of "dropout" and "pushout." First, by asking these young men to describe their experience from a post-leaving perspective allows for a reflective response that is emotive of the experience as a whole. In these examples we are invited to see the process of disengagement and how these students who explain themselves as "good kids," are confronted with institutions that come back with ways to mark them as "bad kids". We come to learn the forces, powers and pressures that



each student experienced in moments of specificity but also in expressions of lasting general feelings that come with this exile.

When I asked Marcus if he wanted to attend school, he was adamant in reinforcing the point that school was a place he wanted to be and it was for other reasons, in particular, the relationships with teachers that affected his experiences in school. Marcus' perception of teachers he encountered was such: "They don't care, they tell you straight up, 'I'm only here to get paid and check your papers, and then leave'". Feeling personally attacked by teachers, Marcus also felt neglected and disposable as a student who was not worthy of teacher investment. The impact of negative personal relationships with teachers made school a problematic space for Marcus. He named situational experiences that led to unfavorable perceptions of school and circumstances that were all but encouraging.

Marcus: I remember I got kicked out of school, the last day for having a black hoodie. And my two other friends had a black hoodie and we were next to our classes, "like you guys in some gang thing? Oh get out!" "What are you talking about?" "You three with the black hoodies." I was like, "we're not even doing nothing". We didn't plan black hoodies or nothing, we just, "oh you got a black hoodie, and you got a black hoodie," we was like, "that's not good...not good."

This story is significant because it allows us to see an everyday punitive occurrence that Marcus would have encountered. The black hoodie, as a marked symbol of threat when worn on black bodies, was the point of contention and punitive response by the teacher. In the teacher's need to police menacing youth from the hallways, she further implicated Marcus in a cycle of punishment he was already caught in. This microaggressive incident tells Marcus even more so that the school space was not welcome to him (Rios, 2011). If we assume these small scale incidences were indeed frequent and repetitive, we can

understand how it created a cumulative experience that would have influenced his negative perception of teachers and of the support that his school would have for him. In sharing about the punitive actions the school would take with students, Marcus gave his critical opinion on in-house suspensions. As a form of detention, for either missing school or "if you been bad," in-house suspension was something Marcus chose to opt out of:

Marcus: So like, I don't know, as a parent if you want your kid in one room knowing they gotta ask to go to the bathroom...I don't even know how to explain it. You're like in a cold garage all day, looking at one wall, like with some teacher behind you like yip yapping or like doing nothing. It's not worth it--I'll have the out of school suspension. I'm like nah, I'm good.

Marcus gives us an unambiguous example of how criminal justice technology and methodology has found its way into school disciplinary practice (Hirschfield, 2008). This reflective perception of how the school responded to his behaviors and identity in disciplinary ways is a crucial part of Marcus' critical perspectives on school and society as being punitive. Marcus' experiences can help bring perspective to the everyday forms of punitive social control that other youth in positions alike his experience and feel as part of the process of disengagement.

Marcus, who left school after turning sixteen, had been caught within the punitive yoke of the school and court systems. He describes the CHINS program, a compulsory attendance court order issued by Marcus' school to make sure he attends school, as part of his school leaving process. "Youth designated as CHINS receive supervision from the court system to manage their behavior through counseling (individual and family), probation, and other individually tailored forms of intervention"(WRRB, 2005, p.10). He

had been in the program, from what he remembers as early as 8th grade, for almost two years. His term in the program characterized by attendance requirements and intrusive check-ins is of particular importance in painting the narrative of his involvement in a system of punitive social control. What is troubling about Marcus' retelling of his experience with CHINS is how the collaboration between his school and the court system had direct impact in his school involvement and success (Hirschfield, 2008). He knew by signing an agreement he was obligated to attend school, but was unclear of what the consequences would be for not following the agreement; his guess was that he would have been "locked up".

Marcus: I tell you, as soon as you hit 16, they tell you, like I was in court on my birthday and they were like "Oh you're 16? Do you want to drop out? Because the CHINS is over." You know what I mean? So they'll ask you, "do you want to drop out or not??"... I was like "I'll go to school."

Marcus chose to continue his education and return to his high school despite the forces around him that were encouraging him to drop out. Despite the fact that he completed the attendance program he was still prompted by the judge to leave school, a practice that pushes "troublemakers" towards a GED path. This message by an adult figure in power is contradicting to a young person, something Marcus was very clear to point out. One commonality found among these four young men was their confrontation with teachers and administrators over their attendance. For students like Marcus, the average number of days missed was much higher than the average of three weeks. Eve Tuck's (2012) research with disengaged students provoked critical thought around attendance issues by presenting a paradoxical argument brought to her attention by students. "The less regularly a student attends, the more difficult school personnel make it to attend"(p.

70)....The hypocrisy of being required to attend (and punished for not attending) a school day when school personnel also don't want to be there insulted youth and made their attempts toward school completion seem futile"(p. 73). Marcus shared this sense of feeling unwanted through his depictions of teacher relationships and the circumstances that challenged his dignity.

With all the negative pressures, what would school success look like for Marcus? It wouldn't be long before the judge's recommendation would fulfill itself: "A couple years, not even like a year and a half later, I dropped out. Not even dropped out, like I said, when we had that storm, they placed me out. Or whatever you want to call it—placed out... dropped out." Marcus, at the very least, had one conflict over attendance (being absent after the snow storm) with school administrators that ultimately resulted in him exiting for good. His distinction between choice and force, illustrated by his use of "dropped out" and "placed out," respectively, is telling of the competing discourses that take place in the exiting of a student from normative schooling. The court issued a choice to Marcus in giving him the option to drop out or not. He chose not to drop out. However, as Marcus points out, the school and even the court's suggestion to "place" him out (i.e. pushout) was illustrative of the school's ultimate authority in the student's "choice". Marcus illustrates in his retelling of his last day how the school's depiction of a free willed "choice" was a punitive and humiliating experience:

Marcus: My teacher was doing attendance, she was like, 'you're not on the attendance list.' I was like, 'what are you talking about? You know I go here, this is my class.' So I went to the office, like 'I'm not on the attendance sheet.' My principal was like 'oh, we dropped you out.' 'Well, what do you mean you dropped me out?' She was like, 'you haven't been coming to school.' I'm like, 'well, we had the storm, we're in school now. What do you mean?' oh like dadada--something about your tardies. And I

was like--whatever. 'Just sign this paper and then we'll drop you out.' I'm like 'alright,' I signed it and they were like, 'oh you can leave.' Middle of the school day too. I was like alright--deuces

Marcus' memory of this incident carries a symbolic violence by assaulting his dignity. His interaction with his teacher and her use of the institutional process found in the attendance sheet embarrasses and excludes Marcus' right to the classroom. His confused reaction over the principal saying "we dropped you out," conflicted with what he perceived was his choice to stay in school or to leave school. He was confronted that day with how institutional power had control over his life circumstances and opportunities. What is concerning and hints to being punitive, is the institutional process of Marcus signing himself out of school. Although Marcus was returning to school after not being there for some time, he was making the active choice to be in school. Whereas the institution had other plans for Marcus, dropping him from their student body attendance he no longer belonged within the walls of that school. All that was left to do was for Marcus to complete the process of returning the blame back on himself by ultimately signing out; an institutional practice that illustrates the student *chose* to leave school. Marcus would then be categorized as a "dropout\_confirmed," an institutional marker chosen by the district to count students who left on their own free will. As we saw with the research done by Bowditch (1993) on disciplinarian policies and procedures, the administration's use of an involuntary drop to essentially "get rid of" Marcus and his problematic attendance may have been done to assert authority or ease the district demands for a larger attending student body. I feel that Marcus' choice to sign should not be seen as apathy, but rather, a form of control institutionally based that excluded Marcus from knowing his rights as a student when faced up against processes of institutional

power. Tuck illustrates how "identifying as having been pushed out, calling oneself a pushout signals admitting one has been betrayed"(2012, p. 62). You can see in Marcus' reflection that he was "placed out" and how this experience produced a critical frame of the institution, its people and the systems working to label and put students in positions of disadvantage.

Terrence is an example of when a student reaches the limit of the institution's "second chances," when policy and disciplinary procedures have harsh consequences that extend into life circumstances. In Terrence's retelling of his schooling experiences he explains how he used to leave school early and roam the city, hanging out with friends rather than be in school. He too had disciplinary action place upon him by the school that required him to attend or else he would be expelled for attendance issues:

Terrence: Well I kinda had that tardy thing too and when they told me that they were going to kick me out for being late, cause I remember it had gotten to like 13 tardies and they said the limit was 15. And since then when I heard I was gonna get kicked out I was like, 'I'm going to school on time, everyday. Going to first period, everyday'.

Terrence's actions showed responsibility and an understanding of the consequences of what would happen if he did not adhere to policy. Fearing being kicked out; he changed his behavior according to school policy and showed that he wanted to stay in school. According to him, when he was sixteen he was excelling in school: "They were letting me out of school early, I had just skipped a grade at the time. I was a good ass kid." Terrence admitted that he would often leave school early and hang out at the local McDonalds with friends where he would be confronted by the local police for not being in school. I asked him when and how often police would bug him about not being in school: "oh man, all the time, so many that I can't even remember". He went on to explain

that if they saw you leaving or if you looked like a young person roaming around the city midday, "that's the only reason they care, if you're around the school area". Kelly's (1993) findings on absenteeism confirm research that had found girls to be as likely as boys to be truant. The difference was that girls tended to stay home or cut classes while staying at school, whereas boys tended to be truant in groups outside the home and were marked as delinquent. Terrence's narrative speaks to this difference and how his actions were perceived as needing stricter discipline and punishment by administrators and local officials.

What ultimately had Terrence in a position of leaving school without a diploma was an incident that in his retelling he seemed a little embarrassed to share. He had been caught leaving school grounds by a safety guard and an administrator after a suspicious incident he was involved in had occurred by the gym building. The incident ultimately led to him meeting with administrators and his mother about not continuing his education at that high school and his options moving forward:

Meshia: When they had the talk with your mom, how did they decide that that was the best place for you?

Terrence: I pretty much told them that I already know my choice was ACES and that's it; either ACES or drop out. You know I'm not dropping out.

Meshia: What was it that made you feel that was your only choice? Why wasn't staying in school a choice?

Terrence: 'Cause they didn't want me back there. I tried to tell them to give me a chance, but they wanted to send me there. So I was like, okay.

Terrence was faced with limited options on his education and despite his pleas to be heard and given a second chance he was forced to leave his high school.

Bowditch (1993) found that disciplinarians would often document every form of misconduct on potential *or identified* troublemakers in order to get around strict

district policies that prohibited disciplinary transfers for such offenses as truancy.

"Transfers were, thus, seen as an important resource for the discipline office. If they could build a sufficiently strong case, they could get rid of a troublemaker, even if he wanted to remain in the school, through the use of a disciplinary transfer"(Bowditch, 1993, p. 504). What is punishing about this institutional process is not just being stripped of any agency, in being placed-out of the school he wanted to stay in and sent to an alternative school, but that overwhelming punished feeling of not being wanted.

Daryn too felt the power and forces that placed him and others into positions where punitive social control was used against students in a process that would push them into positions to be targeted:

Daryn: If they see that you're in trouble, they're gonna try to push you to get in trouble. They probably say something to get you mad so you get in more trouble. They would look for it, they would force it too. They would do stuff 'cause they know how to make us mad, like every kid in the school mad and stuff like that. Like if you come to school late, like 4 times—suspension. Or constantly absent, they'd take off some points of your grade. They'd do stuff like that.

His feelings of being powerless in the face of manipulation are clear in how Daryn describes what this punitive control felt like. Daryn's perspective on how his school environment acts as a punitive process points to the forces that would create conditions for disengagement and ultimately push a student to leave. "Being absent from school (truant), cutting class, and being tardy are often linked to low achievement...students are also punished for this behavior by low grades (possibly failure and, later, loss of credits) and suspensions, which may contribute to a student being held back a grade"(Kelly, 1993, p. 101). His examples of grade penalties and frequent and unnecessary suspensions



express frustration and annoyance that comes with feeling powerless in an environment that knows how to push and has the power to hold a student back. He makes it very clear that not only were people in positions of power looking for how kids were getting in trouble, but they were creating the conditions and forces to agitate students. His feelings of frustration were with how the institution would punish in ways that were detrimental to the success of a student towards graduation. In talking with Daryn about his experiences with punitive measures at school, I wondered if he felt the conditions that set him up at Badger and Dodge Ridge were limiting to his success. Daryn quickly corrected me and made the distinction between the school as an institution being limiting and the social control agents within that were responsible for creating the limiting conditions.

Meshia: So the schools that you went to, Badger and Dodge Ridge, did you feel like they were limiting? Did you feel like they held you back in a way or did you feel like you were able to...

Daryn: Well I wouldn't say the school held me back, it was the certain people who tried to held me back. People who had a lot of power over me. Like in Badger, there was this one assistant principal who didn't want me there because; it was something over a fight in school and he thought I was a part of it, but I was never a part of it. I was an A+ student, in honors class and everything. He just always had a problem with me, I even tried to switch schools, like he told me I could switch schools. And then like it was the way I moved too, 'cause when I (first) went to Badger I lived by somewhere close to a different school, then I moved closer back to Badger, and he wouldn't let me go back to school, so I had to go to Dodge Ridge. And a lot of people, there's the principal and the assistant principal, I wouldn't want to say that they were racists, but they had something against Black people, they surely did. 'Cause like most of my family went there too, and they tried to expel them. My friend Tyronne, they tried to expel him because of something over prom, he never went to prom. I don't know, I just think they had something against us, or I don't know. I really never let it bother me until the end of the year--I was bothered.

Daryn clearly points to the principals as having an impact on his experience with school success and that of his family and friends. His anger at times masks his confusion of the

system and leads to frustration with individuals he encountered. Although he may not have agreed with me initially on pointing to the school as putting him in a position, we can see how the agents of power he encountered were enacting a set of rules and procedures around transfers and discipline. As part of a larger institution of social control; punishment, denial and neglect was part of policies that reinforced a racial order that saw it acceptable and even necessary to punish Daryn and others like him. Here is where we see social control agents of institutions having a large impact on the daily lives of young people (Rios, 2011). Daryn's story illustrates how the accumulation of negative interactions with school personnel can ultimately lead to a student being put in a position where authority is exercised in severe ways. What began as a conflict with a school administrator would end in a misunderstanding of the "threat" Daryn posed to the school administrator, leading to the culminating act of Daryn being expelled from school and transferred to Park View Behavioral School, a disciplinary alternative school for the district. Eve Tuck's take on punitive relationships with administrators asserted how "rule enforcement is personalized, even when school rules are generalized"(2012, p. 159). We can see in Daryn's case how family circumstances that caused him to move around the city caused issues of conflict with administrators and flared up Daryn's association with this principal as being punitive and out to get him. Daryn was not alone in feeling like the principals had a personal grudge against him. Oscar too, who went to a completely different high schools, had similar experiences with administrators giving him a hard time.

Oscar: Why I left Archer? Um...it was just this problem between me and the principal, like ever since the incident that happened with my brother, actually it was two of my brothers that went there...It just messed me up

altogether. Then every time I come to school, I was always getting suspended and stuff like that. They wouldn't actually sign me over to a different school or anything, so I just ended up dropping out. 'Cause like I'm not gonna keep being, keep going, if I continued to stay there I would end up keep staying back with people that were years lower than me. Then it would have just been sad, being 19 in 11th grade, that's just sad, so I just ended up leaving altogether.

What Oscar felt were unfair judgments on his character and potential as a student culminated in him being unable to be successful in school. You can hear the frustration in his voice as he explained how the administrators wouldn't allow him to transfer from the school to start fresh in a different school. The culminating result of feeling like he was stuck and administrator's attempts keep him down, were constant threats to his sustainability at Archer. Oscar was inculcated in a web of criminalization, where associations with a "criminal" family gave reason for the school administration to work with the local police to openly harass him ("And the funny thing is, it's only me, cause I didn't give nobody names, they even sent the cops to my house"). His own anxiety about retaking classes while his age group advanced was a humiliating possibility that he felt he was being pressured towards. In a way, his decision to not take that route wasn't giving-up on himself, it was self-preservation. In her research, Eve Tuck (2012) illustrated how disciplinary approaches resonated with students who were having issues outside of school and felt "school personnel as intimately punitive, on one hand, and painfully indifferent to their personal troubles on the other"(p. 159). Oscar too explained how his brothers' reputations impacted his relationship with administrators and the way in which discipline felt personal, even if administrators intent was to conduct general practice. The punitive forms of administrative control, protocol and sanctions are heavy loads for a young person to bear. The choice to leave for Oscar was a heavy burden onto itself, but did the

institution create the right circumstances and make it too easy for Oscar to leave? How do students, like Oscar, come to the point of being so overwhelmed by the obstacles they face day to day that they decide to leave it all behind in hopes of something better?

A common thread uniting all these stories was the participant's involvement with social control agents who took part in creating a punitive schooling experience. It was the participant's experiences with leaving school and the reflections on their past that shaped their definitions and identity with the label "dropout". Revealed in the retelling of their high school experiences was how the punitive conditions culminated with some sort of exiling practice that "placed" them out. How this is turned inward, the feeling of disposal, unwanted, neglected and oppressed are how these punitive measures are realized as punishment for these young men.

### **Punitive Social Control turned inward**

The reflections provided by these four young men yielded unique experiences with schooling institutions that were manipulative, punitive and oppressive. This overarching system of regulating Black and Brown boys through mechanisms and instruments of control and punishment is what Rios refers to as "punitive social control". The "dropout" label has already been rejected, however, we see how many of the stigmas and stereotypes that surround the rejected label linger in their conceptions of self. What has been referred to as a "labeling hype," Rios (2011) acknowledges as part of a "vicious cycle" produced by a layered effect where agencies of social control further stigmatize the boys he spoke with, leaving them to feel "outcast, shamed, and unaccepted, sometimes leading them to a sense of hopelessness and a deviant self-concept"(p.45).

What does it mean to have punitive social control turned inward? What is revealed next in this process is how these young men come to understand their current positions, where they are and where they felt they should be, and how these internal conflicts with labels and societal expectations become a significant part of their identity development.

Marcus' response to whether he thought people assumed he didn't want to be in school referenced what he thought was typical of most teenagers. "I was just in a phase of like being a teenager, 'I don't want to go to school, I just want to stay up late, play games...I wasn't a bad kid, you can ask someone, I wasn't a bad kid, but if you say something wrong to me of course I'm gonna defend myself, that's how I look at it.'" The phase of being a teenager, that is, discovering what is important to you and finding yourself amongst expectations, is a significant stage of adolescent development. When he points out the phase of a teenager, he suggests he can't be the only one who goes through this "phase" of not wanting to go to school and spending your time elsewhere. According to Marcus, he was "not a bad kid," I think this is an important claim in defense of himself given the surrounding discourse that tries to stereotype Marcus as deviant, reckless and deserving of the punishment he received. When I asked Marcus how he felt about leaving school without a diploma he had a specific insight on it being either a step forward or a step back.

Marcus: Some people look at it like I'm a step back or I might be a step forward. Everybody got their own over sight of it... Mine was like a couple steps back, 'cause I didn't touch school until like a year and a half after. I consider mine is like a step back, I was just chilling when I dropped out. I didn't worry about school or nothing.

In Marcus' perspective, the directionality of his steps appears to be linear. More importantly, he believes it's up to the individual to put their own "over sight" of where

they are in that process. To dichotomize Marcus' argument here, to be moving backwards is to not continue with school, to be doing nothing, as he understood the definition of "dropout" to be someone who does nothing with their life after leaving. Moving forward would be to continue with completing an education that had been diverted for him, a necessary step for employment and social mobility. Marcus' feeling that he was a step back because he didn't continue his education speaks to a socially inscribed pressure and expectation that surrounds him. I felt Marcus' dichotomy introduced an important perspective on positionality that described the phases of reflection during the process of leaving school. I continued to ask the other three participants what they felt was their position in the process by asking whether it was a step forward or a step backward.

Oscar's response was neither of the two, he instead did not put himself in a position relative to the dichotomy: "I feel like I left to do something different, but I just feel like there was just too many obstacles. I would never be able--I would never see myself overcoming." Oscar's response to his positionality was not grounded in any one direction, but was fluid and responsive to the circumstances he felt he was under. His claim was in search of something different, something that was not Archer High School. Despite perhaps a hopeful feeling that he was leaving something unbearable behind in search of something different, there lingered a feeling of loss and frustration.

Oscar: Yeah, but at the same time I felt like a bum. What can I really do? And they have the time at McDonald's, just you have to actually have a high school diploma or a GED. That's the only way you can get it...so like what can I really do? So I had to keep pushing on and stuff... So I don't know, I just felt like—I felt really depressed when I left Archer. It was really unfair. I was getting picked on left and right...Too many obstacles at Archer, I just felt like it was a never ending race. So I ended up deciding—I just gave up on it.

Although he claimed to be doing something different, this decision didn't detract from the experience on a whole feeling unfair. The obstacles he faced in his school environment provided him with very little resources to help manage his process of disengagement. Leaving school for completion through the GED was the only way, something many youth resort to as an escape (Tuck, 2012), but at a crucial cost. Oscar knew this socio-economic cost, but what could he really do? How these culminating experiences placed him in relative positions of disadvantage in society had him depressed about his circumstances, impacting his self-perception as worth-less, or as he puts it, a "bum". For Oscar, leaving school as being either a forward decision or a backward decision did very little to explain his circumstances, rather, "pushing on" was the directionality of choice.

For Terrence, school leaving impacted his self-identity and what he felt he was supposed to be doing as a young adult: "I felt like I kinda went like a step back 'cause I feel like after school you should be like trying to go to college and everything and, you know what I mean, I kinda felt like I wasn't doing what I was supposed to. You know?" For Terrence, the feelings of shame and deviance colored his reflective process with self-blame: "I kinda blame myself for stuff I coulda like, like basic stuff I coulda like corrected back then that I think about now. I don't know, I kinda blame myself for stuff that didn't happen". Rios reminds us that part of adolescence, or as I see it, the privilege of adolescence, is the ability to make mistakes and be given opportunities to learn from them. Terrence's feelings of regret or shame in himself is in relation to what he felt he was a disappointment to; the societal expectation that he should be in college, the normative education trajectory. The pressure of being on a socially prescribed path and straying deviant of that path was what Terrence felt he wasn't living up to. "In an era of

personal responsibility when schools, police, and community members could not guarantee the boys success, nurturing or security, the one thing that these agencies of social control could do was to inculcate in the boys a sense of self-blame"(Rios, 2011, pp. 70-71). Made real by the reaffirmations of unworthiness and relentless punishment that comes with the labeled experience of a "dropout;" the limited opportunity for educational advancement and meaningful job placement outside menial labor only reinforced a self-critical and negative perception of self. Daryn too had a self-critical approach that reinforced negative perceptions of him:

Daryn: I felt like, like I failed for a while, but like after a while, I understood that I'd end up in college. My future is still gonna be bright. I felt like, I don't know, I was disappointed in myself 'cause I was never planning on getting expelled or anything.

The disappointment he had in himself appeared as a sense of self-blame, as he continued to frame his expulsion as something that he wasn't planning on. How the punitive mechanism of institutional expulsion twists and turns itself to be felt as "failure" is an example of how punitive social can be turned inward, conflicting with Daryn's healthy and positive self-conception ("my future is still gonna be bright"). Daryn puts the context of his whole experience into deciding what his process looks like, ultimately extending the directionality of his process beyond a dichotomy of forward or backward.

Meshia: Do you think when you left school was it a move forward, a move back or was it kind of a move to the side?

Daryn: It was like I had to take a couple steps back to move forward and like put it aside sometimes. Like when I'm working and stuff and helping my mom with the bills and stuff. So I put it aside a little, but I still try to work on it as I'm going; when I have the time and stuff like that. So when the time does come to take the test and stuff—I'm ready.



I think Daryn's perspectives on his school leaving process are both inclusive and realistic to what young people are experiencing as they face navigational conflicts along their paths. His goal to complete school (either in the form of a high school diploma or GED) continued to be his north star, but given his financial circumstances and the responsibilities he had there were struggles that required him to put those goals aside. Daryn's determination is what should be acknowledged here. The circumstances that arose in his life, shaping his path, must be considered as part of the process of discovery and pursuit of opportunities. There is so much pressure for young people in general to have a direction with their futures, where choices and decisions at every corner are crucial. It should not be seen automatically as unmotivated, a lag, or denial of responsibilities, but a mature embracement of responsibilities and the realities of struggle.

Over time, as we've seen with these four participants, the reflection on school leaving experiences changes the position of where you are in the process. How they are at fault for what has happened to them is turned inward and internalized as self-blame, shame, personal responsibility and the failure to meet expectations. In these experiences of disengagement and school leaving we are reminded of Rios' definition of punishment as a process where individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, defeated or hopeless based on negative interactions and sanctions imposed (2011, p. xv). There is nothing more punitive than punishing yourself for factors outside your control. A personal responsibility discourse would claim that Marcus should have been in school despite the storm, or Terrence shouldn't have been cutting class and getting into trouble, or Daryn shouldn't have become angered with administrators, or that Oscar should have snitched on his friends and disassociated with his brothers. In changing the perspective and

perhaps the discourse, my concerns here change and I suggest we ask different questions. Why did Marcus find ways to avoid attending school? Why did Daryn feel he had nowhere to turn to for support? Why did Terrence feel he deserved another chance at the direction of his education? Why did Oscar feel that his circumstances were so unbearable that the only option was to leave? These questions cut right through a personal responsibility argument because it repositions us to look at the circumstances from the position of the principle actor and not from a reigning social discourse that is used unfairly and punitively towards certain behaviors more than others.

Regardless of the reasons for how and why students are leaving school, they are faced with the similar circumstance of being without a credible education degree. These four young men identify with feeling responsible to a trajectory, an unfinished path and for them, schooling and earning a credential is attached to a positive, and health identity. What comes next in the process of school leaving? Where do these young men turn to for the support, guidance and motivation they were looking for? How do they craft their pursuit of opportunity?

## **Part II: Pursuing Alternatives**

"Anything you do nowadays you have to study, everything. *Everything.*" -Daryn

We've heard the importance of education in these young men's abilities to dispel the negative label and stereotypes that are associated with "dropout". We've also heard the importance of a "second chance" to make up for what was lost, taken or stripped from them in order to continue on their pursuits of opportunity. Based on the stories we've

heard from Marcus, Terrence, Daryn and Oscar, we can all but feel how important a meaningful second chance would be for each of them. However, these "second chances" in the form of education opportunities are most often found in alternative learning sites. One such alternative learning site in Worcester was described as "a successful model for attracting former dropouts back into the public school system...an opportunity to return to school and earn their high school diploma" (WRRB, 2010). In offering obtainable alternative credentials these sites legitimize their role as a "safety net" in providing opportunity and from the student's perspective, hold the access to a diploma that will bridge them to their futures. this same alternative site described as a "successful model to attract former dropouts," was also there to serve students who were currently enrolled in the comprehensive high schools and who "have been identified as being "at-risk" of dropping out"(WRRB, 2010). The reputation of alternative learning sites as a "safety valve" also legitimizes its role as an institutional dumping ground for "problem" students (Kelly, 1993). The social critique offered by the participants of this study muddies the second chance discourse surrounding alternative learning sites. There exists a pattern of punishment that is part of a continuum of punitive sites these young men continue to experience. In pointing out the false rhetoric of second chance discourse by highlighting the experiences with the stigmatized "dropout" label and GED credential, we see how these alternative learning sites provide empty promises of opportunity. It is this form of punishment, the anticipation of a just opportunity and the eagerness of a better tomorrow, which is uniquely part of the opportunity structure and experience of alternative learning sites.

## **Second Chance Discourse: Safety net/Safety valve**

What is a second chance? What are these young men looking for in a second chance? Are these alternative learning sites offering that second chance? Central to an effective second chance is if an alternative learning site offers the enabling conditions to acquire an education degree. Oscar had his own opinions on the purpose of these programs: "To provide a second opportunity, that's how I feel. A second opportunity to complete school, then schooling and stuff will open more windows than there was before when you just left school". Acknowledging what school completion can do for his future, access to the degree, as Oscar describes, will help open up more opportunities. It is the progression towards degree completion that is necessary to move beyond the circumstances you were left with having just left school. Opportunity in this sense portrays itself as being open and accessible as long as you have the aptitude to do the educational curriculum. Daryn also knew the importance of a second chance to complete school. In talking about what was to come next for him, Daryn kept saying he was still going to graduate. To me, that meant he would have to return to high school, but I knew he really didn't have an opportunity to return, so I asked him:

Meshia: How are you seeing that you're gonna still graduate even though you're not in school?

Daryn: Well, I'm still trying to get my GED, but I was trying to find programs to do like high school diplomas. There was one at Quinsigamond Community College, the Gateway program, and I was trying to do that. They tell me that I was gonna get in and everything, but I don't know what happened, they didn't let me in. They said I was at the top of the list and everything, like I passed my scores and everything to get into the program, I don't know. I showed dedication that I wanted to do my work and everything, but they sent me a letter that said I couldn't get in. I don't know why, they didn't have a reason why on the paper, but I'm gonna study for my GED though and get that. I really wanted my high school diploma though—*bad*.

Without a doubt, this program is probably extremely competitive to get into given the fact that it is most likely the best, as well as one of few, that provides the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma. Daryn's perspective here challenged my own assumptions of what a successful graduate would be by acknowledging programs that offered the GED or a high school diploma were still available ways for him to graduate. To him, the place itself becomes irrelevant, only made important in its available opportunity to finish the degree and symbolically graduate. Daryn's pursuit was about finding the available opportunity to finish the degree, to get back the diploma that was denied him. Daryn was still hopeful to continue on with his education heard in his resounding desires to still get a high school diploma over the GED. I continued to ask Daryn about his experiences after he left school and his struggle with seeking the degree:

Meshia: After the year you got expelled (from Dodge Ridge High) to then go back into school you'd have to start 10th grade?

Daryn: Yeah, at Park View Behavioral School. I was like doing it and everything, then I started getting tired. I didn't want to do those school years over, so they offered me to go to WorkUnited. And then I went there, but they was taking too long for me, like they was taking months to send me into to get my GED, to take the testing. Like they said you had to finish a certain amount of booklets like, they give you these books that you have to finish. I finished all of them. *All of them*. They still didn't send me, then I kept redoing the same things that I was doing over for a good few months. And they didn't send me, and my career thing that I chose to go there for, it was office administration. I got in there, and I was only there for a week, and that week they said that they were shutting down that career. So it was like, there was no point for me being there. So I just left, and then I went to FosterGrow and then did all that.

Daryn's investment in this search for second chance opportunities after being placed in and out of programs clearly shows his dedication. Given the constraints and the haste to which Daryn was looking to finish his degree, the program he was initially sent to from

Dodge Ridge was not the right fit. Daryn could not have foreseen the issues that were to take place at WorkUnited, where programs and enrollment are dependent on government funding. He again became frustrated here with not being able to get his GED, feeling like the program was holding him back and disagreeing on what he felt he was doing towards the degree as not equally understood by the program staff that held the passage to the test. What seemed like a good opportunity to obtain a degree and job training became unrealistic, as the restrictions of the program were weighing on Daryn's plans for his future. His motivation and dedication wasn't the problem, it was the limits on available enabling opportunities. His struggle with getting into the community college program, his disappointment to find that the career path he chose was closed at WorkUnited, led Daryn to move onto FosterGrow where he would complete the program, still however, without earning his GED. Oscar's experience with locating programs right out of high school speaks to the struggle he had with getting what he needed in a second chance opportunity:

Oscar: And I ended up going to the Sparrow Center building first and then that didn't work out, cause the guy wasn't really ever there. So I basically spend my money to go there, then he was never there. So, never getting calls, "oh no school today," so I gave up and waited for WorkUnited. I went there in 2007. So, WorkUnited was alright, I hated living there, but I did the medical assistant class and I passed that. I wasn't able to complete it (the diploma) because I ended up having my son, so, then life was really hard. When I had decided my son is old enough to go, then that's when I found FosterGrow, and I just didn't want to be no delinquent and stuff, you can't even get a job at McDonald's and stuff like that.

Oscar struggled with multiple programs as he sought out opportunities for education and job skills. The lack of structure and respect for student's time ultimately drove Oscar to leave the Sparrow Center GED program. Moving on to WorkUnited he sought out a

career and stuck with the program as long as he could. Understanding that life's elements impact your progress in school, Oscar had to leave the program when his son was born in order to work full-time. Even after leaving Young Achievers, Oscar eventually found his way back to a program (FosterGrow) where he finally would complete school and acquire his GED. What is interesting about Oscar's motivation was what he didn't want for his life. What he says here points to how "dropouts" or youth without a degree are too often negatively labeled as "delinquents," here he aligns this label with a job at McDonalds, representing his perspective on limited mobility in the job market. For Daryn and Oscar, what did it mean to be denied diploma access, twice or even multiple times? Are these programs providing meaningful, enabling conditions to access to a second chance at completing school?

Marcus was more critical about the number of alternative learning sites offered in terms of opportunities to succeed and complete school:

Marcus: Not a lot. Not a lot that they advertise that I think. Like I said the only two places that I knew, the only three was WorkUnited, Sparrow Center and FosterGrow--and Alternative Course Education School that's four options. The best option to me was FosterGrow, because like I said, they give you a trade...I learned something every day, I was learning something new every day. I was eager to go, I was having fun. Even though I didn't like the people there, some peoples was cool, like you just gotta stick it out, you know what I mean? You're there to better yourself. Like Sparrow Center, like I said, they'll give you a piece of paper, "go over there." I never went to WorkUnited or ACES, but I heard about (the school) and nah.

For Marcus, his time spent in FosterGrow was important to his development as a young adult. The program provided Marcus with an opportunity to exercise dedication to his education: "When I was going to school (at FosterGrow) I was there every day--really early". It was a different time, a different seriousness behind his education than his high

school years when he claimed he was in his "phase" of being a teenager. This quality of alternative learning sites should not be undervalued here. Just as any first job, sports team, internship or leadership development activity that young people participate in, they are given an opportunity define their future goals, learn about themselves and challenge themselves to be better. In discussing alternative learning sites with Marcus and Terrence, they were more critical of the value, purpose and presence of these "second chances":

Marcus: See, there is a lot of alternative schools out here.

Terrence: For real, there should be like more regular schools.

Meshia: Why do you think that?

Terrence: 'Cause I feel like this town already knows that there's nothing but like fuck ups here, so they gettin' ready for the fuck up.

Marcus: Not even, you can't even say that. You can, but you can't say "fuck ups." Define your word as "fuck up" though. Like what would you consider a fuck up?

Terrence: It's the kids who want to sit in school and do nothing and then go there and try the same thing, but they get it in an easier way.

Marcus: People be like, "oh, you're a fuck up 'cause you ain't even gettin' no money, or you got no education." So, that person on the corner, he's got no education, but he's making more money than a person in school or working.

Terrence: Nah, I feel ya. If you just like straight up quit finishing shit in regular school, I feel like that's the reason they like have those schools. So just in case you mess up in regular school, you'd be able to go there. It's like a detour, kinda.

What seems to be in defense of the "fuck up" or even students like himself that are marked with the label, Marcus questions Terrence's use of "fuck up." Marcus bridges these alternative means and throws out negative stereotypes when he says the "person on the corner"(read as man on the corner) who is selling drugs is making more money than someone with an education working a 9 to 5 job. In most cases this statement might not hold true and can be debunked with plenty of statistics on earning power of an education. But does that matter here? In Marcus' worldview, not only is that man on the corner *not* a



"fuck up," but he has found a means to his needs and that is worthy of recognition.

Marcus acknowledges the power of a stereotype and looks to point out the nuances by debunking the reliance on negative labels.

Terrence's definition of "fuck up" fits many of the stereotypes of students who drop out that don't care about school or their futures; the ones that lack work ethic and are looking for an easy way out of school. Those who "quit finishing" school or mess up in regular school would be provided with an undeserved opportunity to continue in an alternative school. Terrence's analogy of a "detour" is useful in thinking about the alternative routes students take in pursuing these second chances. When we think about what is meant by a "detour," a deviation from a shorter, more direct route, or an alternative to be used when the normal route cannot, these alternative schools as a second chance is also a more difficult, indirect path that requires knowing which alternate path to take to meet the destination. What does it mean to take a detour or to be detoured? How are schools paving the road for detours? Are certain students directed towards or placed in circumstances where they have no choice but to take this detour?

Despite its rhetoric of second chance, Marcus and Terrence's insights on these schools for the "fuck ups" associates these schools with a negative stigma. Terrence speaks to the larger system of control that makes up the contradiction in the education opportunity structure in Worcester. There are regular schools and there are alternative schools, and according to Terrence, the alternative schools are set up to expect the "fuck up." I tried to understand this contradiction more by asking Marcus and Terrence what they thought the purpose of the alternative schools were if it wasn't to help people get smarter: Their answers: Stats and Money.

Marcus: It's just so their stats or whatever looks good. "Oh we don't got a dropout rate, we don't got low test scores. So we'll send them there, and ACES will look good 'cause they're gonna have their good test scores," or whatever, because they're letting you do whatever and letting you pass. It all looks good. It's like a loop hole.

Alternative learning sites, whether they are publicly or privately funded, have been known to absorb the marginal student body that has left comprehensive high schools (Kelly, 1993; Barton, 2005). Despite the attempts of school districts to be discreet about these movements of students out of their schools, Marcus was critically aware of the power dynamics and false rhetoric that was occurring right in front of him:

Marcus: People forget, for every student in school that's a dollar over their head. They're getting paid or they're getting something from that student. No student is in school for free, like they're getting something for them. So, the more students an alternative school has...they gettin' a grand or something. And on top of that, they get a grand for every student that passes, so who's gonna be like, "oh these five kids ain't." No school's gonna be like these 20 students or these 50 students fail. They'll be like alright, we'll put them a little bit over failing or a little bit under so they can take summer classes, bring it up and then they look good, you know what I mean? There's so much loopholes in school systems that you're bound to look good on paper...If you really went to that school and you was there, you'd be thinking, like, "I know for a fact this many kids didn't pass," so like, if it looks good on paper, nobody is gonna do the research—did this many students pass? Nah, so if it looks good on paper, they're gonna keep it.

Marcus points out a deceptive practice that illustrates the relationship between student successes and pressures to meet government demands and accountability standards. The cover-up process was something Marcus witnessed firsthand, where he saw how schools used students for income, bending the numbers to "look good," and marginalizing the worth of the students they were failing. His breakdown of the systematic use of alternative schools as a district safety valve aligns with the research Kelly (1993) conducted over a decade earlier about the district reliance on continuation schools to

create loopholes for inadequate education practice. "Using continuation programs as a safety valve, many districts continue to collect attendance monies for students even when they are highly disengaged from the schooling enterprise"(Kelly, 1993, pp. xv-xvi).

There is little substantive record of when students earn their diploma/GED, but even less record of *how* students come to earn their alternative diplomas/GED. In fact, research has shown that students enrolled in GED programs fail to do this right away, take several years to obtain their GED, and often times drop out of the school/program before earning the credential (Smith, 2003). As an employee of one of these programs, this was always something that surprised me and I always wondered why it was so frequent for so many. Students that entered the program had been to multiple programs since their time leaving school. Most were there to continue their studies towards their GEDs. Daryn even commented to this trend, "I see a lot of people in and out of programs and stuff". Students had stories of leaving programs because it wasn't the right fit, or of being asked to leave, dropping out or getting pushed out of these learning sites was not uncommon to the alternative experience (Kelly, 1993, Chapter 3). If these four young men represented in this study are only a portion of the population attending alternative learning sites, then these struggles can be said to be more widespread than second chance rhetoric would claim them to be. What we can learn from Daryn, Oscar, Marcus and Terrence is how perseverance matters in pursuing opportunities through these learning sites. When one route was cut off for them, in order to move forward, they had to detour through another route, sometimes several alternative routes to that final completion of school. These young navigators continued to accumulate a unique experience of the

opportunity structure in Worcester; moving from program to program to get what they needed.

### **Problems with Alternative Learning Sites**

For these four young men, alternative learning sites became the means to complete school and acquire the diploma they were denied. What these young men were confronted with instead were punitive conditions that extended from their comprehensive schools into these alternative learning sites. There were distinct relationships and experiences to these alternative learning sites that expressed similar qualities and forms of punitive social control. Students being placed into alternative learning sites created a negative, even stigmatized condition that impacted the quality of learning and the respect for students. These negative attitudes and perceptions of the "dropout" and the GED are fused together, creating punitive conditions within the opportunity structure.

Terrence had said he attended the alternative school, Alternative Course Education School, after being given the choice of dropping out or continuing his education there. I asked him to explain what ACES was to him:

Meshia: Why do people go there?

Terrence: Uh, usually mothers go there because they're pregnant, and there are no regular schools, or for the guys because they don't want to go to school so they end up there. So, you know, you end up there.

Meshia: So do you choose to go there or do you get...

Terrence: No, you get sent there for your actions, for your bad actions.

Meshia: So what would those bad actions be? We talked about tardies...

Terrence: Yeah, not going to school, or not doing anything. They send you there when you do absolutely nothing in school.

For Terrence, ACES became a place where you get sent. He characterized the types of students that would be found in ACES through an underlying gendered code of deviance.

To "end up there" because you're a teenage mother and there are no regular classrooms for you, or a guy who is "acting out being bad"(Marcus) and didn't want to be in the regular classroom would be reason to be "sent" from your normative high school to this alternative school. The experience of "pushout" is gendered in that more boys tend to feel they had been pushed out against their will (Kelly, 1993; Lopez, 2003). Other reasons included being sent for not doing anything in the classroom, wanting an easy way out, or being left back/behind in grades, all characteristics and behaviors that were in opposition to the normatively defined "successful" student.

Marcus had his own perceptions of ACES; he felt the grades were fixed and believed that certain alternative schools, like ACES did nothing to help students succeed. He knew the program wouldn't be for him, he had clear standards for the educational experience he deserved and what a quality alternative program should be: "I'm not gettin' no easy grades, like I don't like nothing easy. Like that's not me, so that's why I was like I'm not going there. When I went to FosterGrow, I'd work for that, you know what I mean, I'd put in work for that GED." Marcus contradicts the stereotype of "dropouts" being lazy and unmotivated by demanding a rigorous quality of instruction. Terrence agreed that in ACES they didn't do anything but teach at a lower level:

Meshia: So those places weren't helpful, or were they? Or how were they helpful?

Terrence: Not really, ACES was definitely a downer. It wouldn't even be teaching me stuff I'd even known in the back of my head. I could have been a teacher there at that school, that's how crappy they was. For real like in ACES, you might as well be homeschooled by your pet monkey. That's how trashed they are.

How Terrence describes the ACES classroom speaks to a specific issue of quality, but also a systemic issue that illustrates the school as part of a continuum of under-

achievement. Milner (2012) found how educators in comprehensive high schools who have a deficit mindset about their students think they are doing their students "a favor" in not creating challenging learning environments and opportunities. "Educators do not teach with rigor and high expectations; students do not learn, or they learn a low level of knowledge and skill"(Milner, 2012, p. 707). This pattern of under-educating students is only enhanced in a stigmatized learning environment that encourages personnel to think of their students as deficient, less adequate learners, incapable of being challenged.

Terrence had just turned 17 when he started at ACES (2007-08), his experiences over the year illustrated the punitive learning environment he encountered:

Meshia: So why did they move you? Or why did you choose to leave? Or did they move you from one to the other?

Terrence: Nah, it was actually because I came in late with...they didn't move me out. I kinda stopped going, because I came in late with two projects and um...it was my fault, it was kinda my fault that they was late. But like I was really trying to get them in on time, because I started doing them at, like I should have did them earlier basically. And when I came in to turn them in, they were like, "oh we're not accepting these, you gotta do the class over." I was like, "yo, I'm not coming back next year to do these two stupid ass classes." I was like, "you know what, see ya later. I'm going home."

Terrence's experience resembles a punitive learning environment where he was once again confronted with very little flexibility on the part of his teachers who were disciplining Terrence into following the rules of the program. Even though he claimed fault with being late on his projects he was still punished with blame and severe consequences for not meeting deadlines. This is not an uncommon practice on the part of school personnel who attempt to assert control over the classroom and program. Kelly (1993, Chapter 3) too found in her observations of alternative programs, that if students were either absent a lot, missed class assignments or didn't participate in class discussion

that school personnel would assert a punishing authority and have students repeat the class for a certain time period, or worse, remove them from the roster. Terrence knew what was being asked of him (to repeat classes) was an unfair demand, but this did not reduce his feeling that he didn't do enough and that he could of corrected things he had done in the past. Again he was faced with not being given a chance to learn from a mistake and to show his potential. The lack of communication and the punitive nature of the program's consequences for "misbehavior" weighed on Terrence's feelings of success.

Kelly's (1993) research found punitive trends and similar ways of disengaging or pushing-out students. The attendance guidelines and procedures at the continuation schools she observed acted as a "pushout mechanism," where "school authorities used the same criteria (attendance, productivity, discipline) to assess a student's progress, but in a more informal manner...Bigger demand to enroll their (comprehensive schools) 'misfits' put La Fuente (continuation school) under pressure to withdraw students who were especially truant, disruptive, or reluctant to work"(Kelly, 1993, p.112). Because of this incident with the alternative school personnel Terrence discharged himself out and went on to WorkUnited for a new opportunity. Asking him to again invest time and energy in something that was already feeling like it was worthless and for him to reject that "opportunity" appears as a mechanism of control that looked to tell Terrence he wasn't trying hard enough and didn't appreciate the "opportunity" he was given. When Terrence chose to leave, it wasn't about "dropping out" or quitting, it was about moving on and leaving something that was challenging to his sense of dignity. Although Terrence was inculcated with self-blame from the many control agents that placed the personal

responsibility onto him, he was also critical about what he himself experienced and what he saw around him with leaving his high school and going to ACES:

Terrence: I feel like that school is just there, just to...it somewhat helps certain kids, but I don't think it helps everybody. There's no way you're helping somebody by teaching them work at a lower level when they just came from somewhere that was teaching them the correct work they was suppose to be getting. You know what I mean? That's why I feel like they's just not helping people. And then, like they don't have the same opportunities as like school. So in another way, *I feel like they're like punishing you in a way*. 'Cause like you couldn't do it in this school, so we're gonna send you here so can do this at like a...you know what I mean? I don't know.

He cuts himself off, but he knows. He knows because he knows that feeling of being betrayed, pushed aside and punished time after time. Suppose we think of these schools as a second chance to be a successful student, how is it that we keep setting students up to fail? In an interview with one of the principals of a continuation school, Kelly (1993) uncovers a critical argument, what she calls a "trade off" between the safety net and safety valve purpose of continuation schools: "I always felt that the biggest loophole in dropouts was in La Fuente...But as soon as we plug that hole [by trying to reduce the high turnover rate in the continuation school], it creates other problems for the district's comprehensive high schools because it becomes a bottle neck [of at risk students]"(Kelly,1993, p.76). This statement, if we consider it to be a trend among districts and continuation schools, has systematic repercussions for how and why these second chance schools are diminishing opportunities. It makes us question whether these programs are purposefully failing or making it more difficult to succeed in order to allow for the "dumping cycle," (Kelly, 1993) the continual influx of students, to be pushed their way.



## **Stigma and Stereotypes: GED and Dropouts**

We've already established how "dropout" is a stereotyped label that covers up layers of complexity and diversity of experience. A stereotype does not end with it being a socio-cultural label, it must also carry a material disadvantage in order for it to persist and be useful in a socio-political stratification context. When I asked Marcus if he thought people looked down on people that drop out, his answer was matter of fact: "of course, they think they're dumber". The pursuit of an alternative degree, in the GED, is shadowed by its negative association with "dropouts".

At the time of her research, Kelly (1993) noted that there seemed to be little research to indicate whether continuation diplomas had advantage or disadvantage in the labor market or higher education. These conclusions are no longer unanswered, but in desperate need of different interpretation. "Scores of young Black and Latino men receive credentials from the state that permanently mark them as incompetent and dangerous citizens...constitutes a formal and enduring classification of social status, which can be used to regulate access and opportunity across numerous social , economic, and political domains"(Rios, 2011, p. 39). This statement provided by Rios is speaking about the credential of a criminal record, however, given the status and use of the GED by young Black and Latino male earners, the same arguments can be found. The GED carries with it a mark of incompetence and labels the beholder with a "formal and enduring" social status that has significant consequences in access to opportunity and life chances. This notion of the GED as a negative credential is best explained by those who interact and endure the label of GED holder/seeker. Through the experiential findings I include, we

see how the GED as an alternative diploma does indeed carry an economic and social disadvantage in the lives of these four young men when it comes to employment. The GED represents how our system of economic opportunity and social mobility stigmatize the very thing these young men are grasping for to make it right.

Meshia: Do you think that people look down on people who left high school? That there is a stigma?

Oscar: Oh yeah, everybody is like that. I don't know one person that really isn't, unless they work through the GED things (program employees), they all look down on people. That's what they call delinquents. But hey, everybody deserves like a chance, and I feel like that's your chance, doing GEDs. If you're getting your GED, you can't knock them. I just don't like the whole embarrassing people situation, that's not cool at all....I've seen it with a few other people I'd say. I've had a few experiences, but it's mostly like job situations. That's why I got the job, I see why, because I actually got my GED. But other than that, like it's mostly other people I see hands on, like—"you ain't gonna amount up to nothing," or "the GED is the furthest you're gonna go," that's how they see it. 'Cause most people that get GEDs never actually pursue school afterward, its small statistics on that. That's how everybody usually put it.

Oscar points out the public perception and stigma that recognizes "dropouts" as "delinquents" committing the worst offense in a meritocratic society-- a young person with no ambition. Despite these negative stereotypes, Oscar recognizes that everyone deserves a chance, and the GED is a way to get out of being a "delinquent". He suggests that we shouldn't look down on or reject the efforts GED seekers are making in trying to improve their lives. Daryn had also been influenced by public perceptions on the negative connotations of the GED: "People say that GEDs and high school diplomas are the same. They are, but in the real life world people are gonna look at it like, 'oh, you slacked in your past, so you're probably gonna slack now.' That's how they're probably gonna look at it, that's why I'd rather have a high school diploma." Daryn knew the reasons his job

recently transferred him to a more lenient peripheral community center was not because he wasn't a desirable employee at the main site, but because he did not hold a high school diploma or GED and they didn't want to see him get fired. He was able speak on other experiences he had had that shaped his perception of the GED's stigma and the qualitative difference between a high school diploma and the GED in the job market:

Daryn: There was this job that I used to work at the youth center when I was younger, this was when I was still in high school. 'Cause they did a GED program and stuff, and the person that did the class he said the same thing I told you, they look at the GED and high school diplomas like differently. It might be the same, but they look at it differently 'cause there is a *story* behind the GED. The high school diploma you just went straight through high school. GED is like, "oh you wasn't working in school, so you went to go get your GED, you just trying to find a..." I don't know, just how he explained it. It seemed so true because the people who worked at the youth center either had their high school diploma or was still in school. Nobody there had their GED. So I asked the bosses, like "did anybody ever here apply with their GED?" And she said "yeah", and I was like, "how come none of them were hired," and she just tried to push me off of the question. And I was like, okay, I'm not even gonna ask no more. I was like that's kinda unfair. That showed me, I was like okay, but I'm still gonna get my GED though, I just have to put some more stuff on my resume.

Daryn knew the GED itself was not enough. The GED on its own appears to be a stigmatized credential because it has a story, a record of a past that hinted towards a person that was deficient, deviant, or delinquent. He knew he would have to add more to his resume to make up for the negative impact the alternative degree had on his opportunities and social perception in the job market. Oscar had his own experiences with the negative perception of the GED and his employability at certain jobs. A practical concern Oscar brought up illustrated the complications with not having a credential from an established high school when asked on a resume or interview. Oscar claimed he would put down FosterGrow, the alternative program he obtained his GED in. Oscar explained

the situation he was in with his diminished credential: "GED situation is cool and stuff, but it's not really that cool...You get further with just a high school diploma. A lot of people that's hiring, that's what they look at more. They think the GED is just an easy way out". I asked Oscar where he learned that people thought the GED was an easy way out.

Oscar: It was something that someone said to me when I was younger. I can't really put it to stone, like word for word. This was when I just finished school (FosterGrow) and I went to the job, brought my diploma, well my GED and stuff. And he was like, "I'm looking for people that actually completed high school" and stuff like that. It felt like, I don't know, I can't remember what way he put it in words, but basically he was saying that he felt like it's not people that took the easy way out, but I don't know.

Meshia: Do you think that's true that they're only looking for people who completed high school?

Oscar: Most times I do, because like I finished school and stuff, but I'm still like having trouble with jobs. I don't know, I think that sometimes it hurts me a lot.

Although Oscar knew it wasn't right, or just, he knew that this was "true" in that the GED is perceived and received with negative connotation. These programs don't help resolve the gap the stigma creates, it perpetuates it by keeping hidden the discourse and in not naming the stigma. A young person can't undo a GED, can't shed the GED and go and get a high school diploma. The only way to do this is to get a higher degree that will cover up the past. Terrence also had experience with employment and knowing basic credentials could only get you so far: "A lot of these jobs expect a lot of qualifications, like more than just having a high school diploma or a GED." Marcus found that his time spent in FosterGrow offered little tangible benefit in finding and securing work after the program's end.

Marcus: Meshia. I was going to FosterGrow like two years ago, I still do not have a job. Like I'm not sitting on my butt not doing nothing, like yo I'm on my google, yahoo, like yo, I'm filling out applications, you know what I mean? It's either a bullshit one or somewhere out of state. You gotta have your license to drive somewhere or you gotta have an assisted ride, so therefore, how am I gonna get to work? For me personally, I've got a good resume, good references, so like, I don't know. Like I got a good work ethic, so I don't know. For me not to have a job I look at it like, there's not too many good jobs out there. There's not, or you got to have qualifications.

Terrence and Marcus shared the same concerns when it came to their eligibility to obtain employment in the job market. Oscar talked about how his WorkUnited certificate as a medical assistant had little weight and credibility in successfully landing jobs in the medical care field:

Oscar: But the medical assistant class was alright, but then I couldn't really get a job over there because they said that I didn't have enough experience. I'm like, "but I took a class for it, I have this certificate, everything. I've got CPR certified" and they said I couldn't do nothing with it. So it would have been no point for me to keep renewing it and I was like pursuing the classes and stuff. I'd need to go back to school, actual school to pursue those classes, then I'd be able to do something with it.

Oscar found little use for the certificate he received when he attempted to put it to use in finding work in the medical care field. The certificate was worth-less in the job economy, Oscar soon found that the only way to advance in the field was to continue in higher education and go back to "actual school". Knowing the realities of the commitment this would take, be it time, financial, personal, Oscar claimed it wasn't something he was interested in.

Marcus was clear about wanting a career over a job, so much so that he was not willing to take a menial wage job as the means to a greater end because he felt that greater end would never come. Reflecting on where the jobs were for young people in

Worcester, Marcus introduced a critique of the structural limitations that the city maintains for low-income labor pools:

Marcus: Now that I think about it, if you really look at it, how do McDonalds or Burger King hire so many people, but like somewhere downtown, some corporate building can't hire like two or three interns or something like that. How? Now that I think about it, I really don't get that.

Terrence: I feel you on the McDonalds thing. To be honest, I don't want to be caught dead working there, because like my stats are way too high for McDonalds, no way in hell.

Marcus: I'm just saying like you could, but you got your pride. Now that I point that out, that makes no sense, like really. So many people working at a fast food restaurant, but there's not people working at the corporate jobs, you know what I mean? There's got to be better jobs, there's got to be man. It makes no sense, now that I'm thinking of it. They're trying to keep you low, you know what I mean?

They knew the realities of the market, but at the same time were puzzled by what they were told were good marketable skills and qualifications over the biases of the job market. Francisco Rivera-Batiz (1995, as cited in Tuck (2012)) made a point to complicate the negative perception of the GED by distinguishing the increased impact of a GED holder's other social identities on their employability. "Stereotyping by employers leads GED holders to be subject to great racial and ethnic discrimination"(Tuck: 2012, p. 104). The discrimination by race/ethnicity and gender as compounded with the negative perception of GED and its association with "dropouts," materializes in different ways for each individual, but the overall stereotyping creates even greater barriers and exposure to discriminating practices. Being young and Black in Worcester with little financial resource, on diverted paths for education and employment, created challenges for these four men that were rooted beyond their immediate circumstances.

Marcus: So statistically, everybody is bound to fail--not bound, they're meant to fail--dead ass. You're meant to fail. Like yo, it's so hard to be successful, but so easy to fail. How is that possible?

The experiences of these four young men who have traversed these two sites and how their experiences, whether first hand or second hand, expose the similarities and ties between the two are important critical perspectives of the opportunity structure that pushed them aside, revealing their systemic web of rules, road blocks and rituals. Seeking out alternative education and second chance opportunities becomes the experience of many after they leave school. These pursuits characterize much of the experience of students for many meaningful reasons. As Tuck suggests, the GED may give them access to jobs interviews and college admissions that otherwise would be denied to them, but this is only entry, not sustainability."GED youth experience the GED as a stigmatized credential, and less effective passport to sustainable employment and higher education than the high school diploma. However, for many youth, the GED provides access to job interviews and college admissions processes to which they would not have gained access without the credential"(Tuck, 2012, p.147). If we place so much power in these alternative sites to hold and safeguard what has been denied to our students, then we must be very critical and outraged at the subpar quality of education and the punitive forms of discipline that is practiced and perpetuated in these alternative learning sites. They prove themselves to be extensions of discipline and punitive social control that existed in the high schools these young people were coming from.

We see how these pursuits are necessary to distinguish themselves socially from "bums," to make up the continuum that was broken for them. We hear the feelings of disposal that comes with being placed-out of schools, the feelings of frustration in the lack of quality education and learning that limit their growth towards their goals, and the

feelings of neglect that comes with the lack of support and appreciation for their dreams. What is made clear to us is how these early actions are damaging the progress of life chances for young people, and that these punitive mechanisms, whether they be happening in schools or in alternative learning sites are disabling futures filled with open opportunities. These sites hold something more important than access to the GED, they hold and safeguard access to better opportunities and life chances for many that have already experienced one, if not multiple denials of those opportunities. Are we providing youth with the enabling conditions access to these second chances? Do the second chances allow for these young people to exercise their full potential?

### **To feel unfinished**

Despite the time and energy these four young men dedicated to their pursuits of second chance opportunity in Worcester, there lingered a feeling of being unfinished, an incomplete feeling illustrative of the overall school leaving process. I followed up with Terrence about his experiences and what he saw as opportunities provided in alternative learning sites:

Terrence: What were my opportunities?

Meshia: Did you feel like it was a good place to prove yourself or do something?

Terrence: No (emphatically)

Meshia: Okay so why not?

Terrence: For real, out here you gotta create your own opportunities. I definitely felt successful after I got it (high school diploma), but then I felt like the work wasn't done. There's still like way more to do.

Despite having received a high school diploma, Terrence still felt that seeking out opportunities in Worcester was going to be a struggle. The investment in second chance



opportunities for Terrence did little to set him up for future success or to provide him with the navigational tools to seek out career paths or college admissions. This left him with feeling like there was always more to do. Oscar continually had this feeling when issues arose with employment and not being able to support his family even after all the bills were paid:

Oscar: So I was only ending up with like 29 dollars every week, and stuff like that, so like it just wasn't working out either. I ended up leaving that, and I felt like I'm always forced to leave something. Leave something that I'm kinda comfortable at instead of actually staying there—help progress to get somewhere, like how do I wanna say--start at the bottom and work your way to the top and stuff like that. So like I was forced to leave that job too. I felt like I'm not getting a fair opportunity like everybody else is doing. I don't know, I just can't wait 'till my life just gets changed around. I don't know, it just feels like I'm just impatient now. Back then I had a lot of patience, but like now I'm just extremely impatient. Now I have two kids, 25, and I don't know. I just don't like the position I'm in right now.

Oscar's feeling that he is always forced to leave is characteristic of an opportunity structure that lacks the supportive infrastructure to produce social mobility for its least educated citizens. Frustrated with not being able to work his way up the social ladder or through his desired medical career path, created the feeling that he wasn't being given a fair opportunity to aspire to his potential. It is his position in the school leaving process, being in his mid-20's, a father with responsibilities, that has him reflecting on his struggle and feeling impatient with his current limitations in opportunities. I asked both Terrence and Marcus what they thought these students were getting out of the programs and if they helped young people shape successful futures:

Meshia: So what's the outcome? What do they hope these students are getting?

Terrence: You're gonna graduate, but you're not gonna get like the same things you could get if you were like in regular high school. Like regular

high school, you could like sign up for like college courses somewhere, or you know what I mean. If you're there, you're not doing it there, you're gonna have to like do it on your own.

Marcus: Support.

Terrence: That's basically what he's saying, there's no support there. It's just straight, do it yourself and get out and move on.

Meshia: Yeah, and move on to what?

Marcus: To life.

Terrence: Yeah, to life. You might as well start working, if you're in one of those alternative schools. You're not gonna be going to college after, I mean, you might, but you gotta do it yourself. You're not gonna have like help by the school.

Marcus: Then again, there's that one kid that always proves people wrong. There's that one kid, "oh, I was in an alternative school, you think I can't make it? Alright, I'm gonna prove you wrong." There's always that one kid.

Terrence: Oh hell yeah, there's definitely the people that made it, but they're not making it the way they wanted it to be done the first time when they got in school.

What they acknowledge as support, is what is needed in the current second-chance opportunity structure. For young people who are marginalized by punitive institutional practices and exiled from the resources offered by normative school trajectories, they must be creative among resource deprivations and learn to develop their own paths towards future opportunities. Daryn was one of those students who was making up for not being able to complete school the way he wanted to the first time:

Meshia: How long did you have that feeling of disappointment?

Daryn: Of feeling like that? Well, I still feel like that, but ya know, time just goes by and I'm not caring, but still trying to get into school and finish my work.

Meshia: So what was it that made you change that feeling?

Daryn: My mom. FosterGrow. I'm serious, you guys told me like, your life is never done. Even if you don't finish the program, you guys can still do other stuff. That's what you guys told me. And I'm still young too, still got a lot of time.

Daryn's perspective, as example, reveals how these young men, despite the barriers, must endure and persist in finishing the degree and seeking out second chances to develop and build strong paths towards careers and successful lives. With few exceptions, research on what comes after high school for "dropouts" is limited when talking about "second chance" educational inequalities (Tuck, 2012, Tanner et al., 1995, Kelly, 1993). I believe that we rely too much on these alternatives as solutions, as ways for young people who have left school to meet some middle ground and gain their way back to mainstream. I don't believe that these programs do that with quality or with dignity. I think we are punishing young people, further punishing them after they've already been put into situations where they are forced to leave their high schools. The conditions of struggle for privileged folks is that in and through perseverance and hard work the struggle ends. However, for those marginalized by race and class, the struggle does not end in exactly these terms. For many of us, the struggle is persistent. However, in a system that exemplifies those that move beyond the struggle, and dare I say, "make it," those that are left behind are seen as at fault and punished for struggling.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Through interviews with four young Black men from Worcester, MA (Marcus, 21; Terrence, 23; Daryn, 20; and Oscar, 25) we together explored their experiences in high school, what led them to leave without a diploma, and where they went with their educational pursuits. My intention in conducting this research was to make my work meaningful and to sincerely learn about the lived experience and quality of life in relation to this particular configuration of education inequities. This approach led to firsthand accounts of the participants' critiques on their past high schools, their participation with alternative learning sites, and the context surrounding their lives as young, under-credentialed black men in Worcester, Massachusetts. Hearing the experiences and stories of young men who had been discounted in mainstream school districts and were in pursuit of their own definitions of success unveiled a critique of "second chance" schools that made clear its marginal quality in the opportunity structure of Worcester.

At its very core, the experiences provided by these four young men complicate general understandings of dropouts. They were adamant about what they were not, and they were not giving up on life. Looking at their high school experiences we see traces of racial, class and gender biases and discrimination. All four participants were in conflict with teachers and administrators about attendance, discipline issues, or combinations of the two. Marcus' involvement with court ordered attendance and frequent incidents with teachers and administrators over discipline issues resulted in him being caught in a web of disciplinary procedures where lack of communication and uncertainty about his rights put him out of school on a path towards alternative opportunities. Terrence's history of

attendance and frequent visits to the office created a record around the "type" of student he was, ultimately leaving him with little choice in the direction of his education. He ultimately felt like he was unworthy of a second chance and blamed himself for his circumstances. Daryn's experience with transfers and negative interactions with administrators kept him searching for support and direction that was difficult to find in his school environment, placing him in a position of frustration where he felt he had very little control over his educational future. Oscar's punitive interactions with teachers and administrators positioned him in a cycle of ubiquitous criminalization where he felt unfair treatment and discipline made his schooling experience so unbearable that leaving was the only option. Despite the clear presence of school environment factors and damaging relationships with social control agents, there lingered a discourse of shame that left these young men with a sense of personal responsibility and the need to defend their dignity.

Education became a way to see through it, a second chance for an opportunity to complete school. The limited education and job opportunities were felt to be out, but not easily available. All four of these young men spent time searching and attending multiple alternative learning sites in Worcester, looking not just for second chances, but third and fourth chances to prove their right to a fair education. However, they were not met with fair chances. Alternative learning sites, in the experiences of these young men, were manipulated, disrespectful and too often a punished alternative. The result of their time, money and energy into these programs left these participants with a subpar educational experience, meager job prospects and contradictions on the value of the GED, resulting very little credibility as a school completer. It was the feeling unfinished, the need to still

do more to make up for what was lost that continues to shame and punish these young people.

Instead of merely looking at the passage through high school, it is necessary to see the whole frame of the experience by looking at how youth passage after high school into alternative learning sites provides "second chance" opportunities for better futures. It appears however, that alternative learning sites act to sustain the opportunity gap, adopting a false enablement of opportunity. Victor Rios refers to the youth control complex as a "web" of institutions that collectively punish and stigmatize in an attempt to control Black and Brown male youth. Alternative learning sites, just as the schools the four young men in this study experienced, are part of the continuum of sites that make up this "web". School failure appears to be reason enough to criminalize and punish young people-- the physical movement out of schools but also the symbolic shaming that goes with school failure. What is perceived as an individual's failure to meet school standards of success is the predominant reason to punish these young people. What we saw from their experiences, was the way schooling institutions and the people representing these institutions, play a role in being responsible for creating and perpetuating the conditions that they name as school failure. In an unrelenting capacity, youth are punished and stigmatized for being "troublemakers," "dropouts," GED earners, and youth-out-of-school.

Pathological shaming, according to Hagan and McCarthy (as cited in Rios, 2011), is different from normal shame that holds community members accountable for behaviors then reintegrates them into the group. To pathologically shame is the "process by which the transgressor is permanently stigmatized, shamed into feeling like a permanent

outsider, and perpetually humiliated for his or her negative behavior," thus disintegrating them from the group or society (Rios, 2011, pp. 89-90). Based on the experiences and discussion that came from these four participants, we see the many ways these young people are intensely shamed for actions and behaviors that either could have been diverted with proper support, or was neither of their faults, but in fact, that of those who point the shaming finger. It is my belief that institutions of social control, specifically the case of Worcester, foster conditions for pathological shame to take place by placing students out into a society that will criminalize and punish under-credentialed, low-income, youth of color. Physical punishment may be in the credit-recovery, detentions, suspensions, expulsions, placements, material deprivations, wasted money and time. But what we have seen from these participants is how symbolic punishment takes on different forms that pressure young people to take positions that protect their dignity. Symbolic forms would be the lack of support and mentorship, the comments from principals, the lack of explanation and empathy, the phrases "you'll never amount to nothing," the humiliation, the shame, the "I couldn't bear it no more," the reality of unfairness.

In shame it is not only how social control impacts youth physically, but also being constantly forced to leave or placed-out of opportunities. These diminished fair opportunities are punishments, forms of shame and redistributed aspirations (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) that manifest as anticipation differently in these four young men. Anticipation in this sense, the expectation of a just opportunity and the eagerness for a better tomorrow, is manipulated in a system that constructs second chances for these young men more as rhetoric than as an opportunity to actualize potential. The meritocratic ethic tells us that based on our own merits and desires, we can surpass

barriers that arise and reach our ambitions. It is this hope that drives people to feel excited and believe that outcome will happen. Cruelty of anticipation is in the hypocrisy of the American dream, and the second chance opportunities that construct hope and a trust in the promise. This is not to say that youth are not critical or are being duped by the system. We have already seen in the critical perspectives offered by these young men, that they have their doubts. "Youth are betrayed by the teachers' and administrators' insistence on the promises of meritocracy and the American Dream...youth see school personnel as believing more in (false) meritocracy than in the complexity of youths' lives, and they experience this as betrayal"(Tuck, 2012, p. 75). Anticipation for a just opportunity and a better tomorrow for these young men is a waiting game, a process that ebbs and flows. Marcus' story is an example of how anticipation manifests itself as a critical lens that wears on you and breeds doubt and pessimism. The odds are not in your favor in a system that manipulates your chances, leaving Marcus hesitant to move on to a future that may never come. Terrence exemplifies how anticipation builds up inside and creates an expectation of oneself to be ready and calculated in the obstacles to come. His feeling of self-blame, thinking that it is up to him to make up for opportunities he wasted leaves him feeling responsible for a future where the odds are already against him, creates an uneasy assumption of an anticipated promise. Daryn is an example of how anticipation manifests itself in a dreamer, the state of having positive beliefs, a hopefulness. He is also realistic in knowing that a GED or high school diploma is crucial to take care of his responsibilities. His optimism is an assurance and certainty, a trust in his future by whatever means necessary. Oscar is example of how anticipation manifests



in impatience. His state of anxiousness that manifests as longing and thirst, a restlessness for his life to move forward and for his future to come.

This study sought to complicate second chance opportunities as equitable opportunity. The proliferation of alternative learning sites serves a purpose; to appease the need of comprehensive high schools to have a physical place to dis-locate students who challenge conformity in some way or to serve as the cogs of a hypocritical machine we have come to know fondly as the meritocratic American Dream. Moving students of high schools into "second chance" opportunity situations is an institutional strategy that perpetuates a segregated society, where education and diploma denial is the tool of oppression. "One fundamental and enduring goal that school actors pursue, through diverse means and with variable success...is the preparation and sorting of youth for future positions in the occupational and social order"(Hirschfield, 2008, p. 88). Keeping young people low, creating an underclass with no way of being socially or economically mobile is a form of systematic punishment for being poor, young, and Black in a place like Worcester. The contradiction of opportunity is in the lack of support and motivation, made apparent in the apathy, neglect and manipulation of disadvantaged young people by control agents and institutions. One of the key struggles of these four young men, and scores of other "good kids," are the contradictory messages of hopeful dreams and aspirations in regards to education, college and employment. This is the punishing condition of anticipation that is made apparent in the social critiques and feelings of young people at the crest of this contradiction. It is this opportunity structure that Rios, myself and other concerned citizens believe is creating "a generation of marginalized

young people, who, by way of social incapacitation, are prevented from engaging in a full affirmation of their humanity"(Rios, 2011, p. 160).

### **Gaps Addressed and Limitations**

*A focus on post-leaving.* Too often in academic and administrative accounts of "dropouts" there is a focus on what happened in schools and how the collective "we" (researchers, administrators, teachers and parents) can keep students in school. Although these are important concerns, to me, they serve as context to a broader point of inquiry. My larger concern here is how and why young people leave school, but also where and what do they go on to next. This study brought light not only to Worcester's public school system, but to its system of second chance opportunity found in its established network of alternative learning sites. What we do not recognize is the number of young people in Worcester leaving schools, both comprehensive and alternative. The numbers show, with each year adding up to being a few hundred, the accumulation over five years adds up to a few thousand. As the range of ages for many of the alternative learning programs and schools maxes out at 25, you have an 8 year cohort of college-aged young people who are seeking basic education credentials. According to State distributed numbers on "dropouts," this is approximately 3,200 students in Worcester that the district has let go over an eight year span (MA DOE, 2012). How are these alternative learning sites supposed to absorb 3,200+ students? If these young people fail to receive a credential by this max age, they will be faced with even less resources for undereducated adults. The scope of my study suggests that these young people struggle with getting into or through

programs, struggle with getting GEDs and quality jobs, and struggle with finding and securing paths into college programs and careers.

*Critical Inquiries into the System of Alternative Learning Sites.* Because alternative learning sites have become the "stepchild" of high schools, it is ignored and often overlooked in research and ignored in public policy reviews. This study sought to point out the significance of alternative learning sites in creating equitable opportunities through education. These three claims were stated in the Massachusetts Department of Education (Frequently Asked Question, 2012) explanations of things to avoid in Alternative Education programs/schools:

1. "Success with the targeted population requires that the Alternative Education program/school does not function as a substandard educational placement. Students must not receive the message that they have been marginalized. Districts should recognize that at-risk students need intensive services in a positive environment to succeed"
2. "The curriculum must be as challenging as that offered to students in traditional classrooms. Research demonstrates that the best approach toward students with learning deficits is to raise expectations. Challenging students academically communicates faith in their capacity to learn and inspires engagement in the process"
3. "The "culture" of the Alternative Education program/school must be instilled with a sense that all students are valuable and can succeed. Program/school policies should be written to help students pursue their academic goals. Alternative Education programs/schools should address behavior as an educational matter and establish positive protocols short of disciplinary exclusion. Discipline must be integrated into the curriculum as part of the learning process"

Unfortunately, for the experiences shared by the four participants in this study, these three programmatic core principles were either nonexistent, or poorly executed to the point of being significantly misunderstood. Given current representation in the media and a rise in public attention, we do ourselves a disservice to not be critical of these "second chances" and question how our meritocratic value system shadow these sites and young people beneath its discourse. What better way to understand this system than to seek out the experiences of those participating. "For youth, to hold a mirror up to determine the lived value of the GED is to actually hold a mirror up to the rules and practices inside schools that pushed them out. Their perceptions of the value of the GED are in relation to their experiences of being pushed out" (Tuck, 2012, p.11). The way Tuck refers to the critical inquiry into the GED, is similar to the way I'm suggesting youth critiques of alternative learning sites can reveal their lived value and hold a mirror up to the education opportunity structure. If the school leaving process is a process in punishment, then interactions and sanctions placed on these young people as they pursue opportunities is punitive in form and incapacitating in consequence. A limitation, or rather an area of future research for this work, would be a more critical investigation on alternative learning sites in the Worcester area. It would enable a more thorough representation of the punitive experiences, but also highlight the inspiring experiences that make up the networked map of opportunity in Worcester.

*GED as alternative.* This study looks to see the GED not only as a diminished alternative, but as a punished alternative to the high school diploma. However, this may appear as a limitation. Rarely discussed in the literature, Eve Tuck's representation of the GED as valued by youth grounds itself in value according to youth perspectives. "Our

findings indicate prior analyses of the GED conducted by academics and the press have completely missed the picture on the most prominent element of the GED: hope. Desire. Pained, yes. Self-reflective, yes. But also reflective and growing, rhizomatic. Regrouping. And ultimately, pretty well informed"(Tuck, 2012, p.109). My foresight on this issue, was not brought to my attention until reviewing Tuck's work and applying it to my participants' experiences. This study did attempt to present the ways it is valued in some regards, but based on the line of questioning and analysis, it relied too heavily on the crutch that looks to the economic and material deprivations of the GED.

*Semantics.* What I'd like to introduce here, as brought to my attention by Marcus in the expressions, "placed-out" and "dropped-out" as being the act of institutions removing students from school. Where "dropout" has been seen as the individual choice to remove oneself, and "pushout" as the institution having a factor or force in that decision to remove oneself, it has also been used to refer to the institutional force alone as the pushing factor. In the past, I tended to lean towards the meaning behind pushout over dropout as the base to start. Adding to the complexity of these terms and their relative experiences, I think in order to be really clear and concise about what we mean, we must be direct about the action of institutions and what they are doing, emphasizing exactly how these young people find themselves out of school. "Placed-out" highlights the institution's role as having the power to place students out of their schools. Equally, how "dropped-out" is used to reinterpret the "dropout" as an individual choice, and to flip it on its head and place the act of "drop" on the institution itself. "Dropped-out" expresses the movement of a student being "dropped" by a school, and positions us to look at the institution first. School discipline that leads to student exit from high school is one

example of how procedures create an experience or condition of exile. Changing our language leads us to question the power and trust we give schools and learning institutions that play a role in exiling our young people and incapacitate them from achieving the futures and ambitions we claim are equitable rights for all. This is not meant to merely add to the nomenclature of students exiting, but as Tuck (2012) suggests, "pushout" may be too meek a term to describe what is happening in our schools (p.61). And in the context and evidence I speak about, "placed-out" and "dropped-out" does suggest the intentional actions by institutions and social control agents.

### **Future Research and Policy/Practice Recommendations**

*Geographic exploration of the GED.* This study looks to provide a local perspective of the GED as an alternative education credential. It is my theory that the GED is going to perform and create opportunity differently in different contexts. In a city like Worcester, where the Black population has been historically marginalized socially, geographically, politically and economically, the lack of a credential, even at a level of bachelor's degree, is going to impact individuals' economic advantage significantly. The Worcester workforce is highly educated, with 29.6% of resident adults 25 or older obtaining a Bachelor's degree or higher (WRRB, 2013, p.11). Worcester as a workplace for the surrounding suburbs and townships most likely makes this percentage of White, educated, adult workers higher than what has been reported by the 2010 census. The economy itself encourages and demands an educated workforce. Being a city with multiple higher education institutions and state-of-the-art medical facilities, education and health sectors make up a large proportion of available jobs for all income-areas. A

smaller city with a high unemployment rate and depressed industrial economy with depleted opportunities for low-skill workers can potentially impact the valued currency of the GED, especially in an economy that is inflated by college graduates and traveling middle-income workers coming in from the suburban towns. Recent research on the GED reveals a geographically-centered position that can bring nuanced analysis to the political economy of the GED (Tuck, 2012). Given this consideration, the GED has a more marginalizing impact as a credential and a distinct marker of difference in an economy that privileges educated workers. Young GED seekers/earners in Worcester are faced everyday with a contradiction--on the one hand, they are inculcated with a spatially distributed discourse that suggests higher education, and education in general, is open and necessary for success, however, their pursuits of education, albeit alternative in form, are punished and their hopeful credential, stigmatized. A geographical context matters here to understand the value of the GED and its perceived stigma.

*Transferring Students Out.* Appendix # illustrates the student transfers by school and reason for transfer, 2011-12 for Worcester comprehensive high schools. The document was initiated by Worcester school board committee in December 2010 requiring the high schools to provide transfer numbers and a categorical description on reasons for leaving. The categories included a pattern of students that transferred out of the high school into another WPS, or outside the district, as well as the forms of leaving school, among them are being aged out at 22 (SPED), homeschooling per superintendent office and even death. What I selected to present out of this source to be most relevant to this body of work are the numbers provided for "dropout" categories and suspensions, both being forms and reasons for transferring out students.

There are three areas that I believe underestimate the issue and would like to point out for restructuring. First, the inclusion of "dropout" categories and suspensions as a form of transfer is an insightful inclusion that could benefit critical shifts in student mobility categorizations. In homogenizing the movement of students out of schools as "transfers," we are able to focus in on their mobility as part of a schooling experience, perhaps alleviating its stigma. On a similar critical scope, Potts (as cited in Armstrong, 2003) takes on education inclusion and exclusion in her discussion on schools in Birmingham, UK. "Some of the arguments put forward challenge commonly held assumptions about, for example, the positive outcomes of 'spatial stability/immobility,' suggesting that fluidity and mobility can be more conducive to developing inclusion and that 'staying put' is by no means a taken-for-granted factor in improving attainment in education"(Armstrong, 2003, p. 13). Thinking about how movement can be conducive for inclusion challenges previous notions that look to keep "at-risk" students in school. In the two specific cases of Daryn and Oscar, they both wanted to transfer to other high schools to get a better chance and to escape oppressive environments. It was the institutions inflexible stance that led to pressured situations where Daryn and Oscar were forced to leave their high schools. If transfers are used as tools of oppression that look to exclude, how can we reconceptualize transfers as tools of freedom that can create spaces for inclusion? Was this the so-called "benign" attempt of alternative learning sites for "failed" student? Our realized conception of these transfers as inclusion is nowhere near it should be.

Second, the diversification of the preexisting "dropout" category is necessary, but as always, incomplete. In requiring schools to give reason to the transfers this request



expanded the category of "dropout" to include distinctions, like "dropout for employment," "dropout for GED or adult ed," "dropout for jail". I do agree that these are important distinctions of transfers, but they do very little in understanding the reason or even the outcome of this transfer. Given what we've just learned from the four participants in this study, "dropout for employment" does not often conspire in sustainable work, or "dropout for GED or adult ed" goes unearned without recourse. Reasons are only there to appease institutional arguments as to why students are choosing to leave, it does little to explain the realities with the opportunity structure these young people face. Third, not only is it completely absurd, but also disgraceful, that such categories as "confirmed dropout/plans unknown" and "unknown status/location" exist as palpable classification options. The majority of students classified by the district as "dropouts" fall into one of these two categories. With total enrollment reported at 4,877 this year, how does the district not support "next steps" or "lose" over 200 students?

The numbers provided in APENDIX # are different than those provided by the Department on these same four Worcester schools for the same academic year. According to the Massachusetts DOE (2013), in the 2011-12 academic year the four comprehensive schools had a total dropout number of 252. If we determine the total dropout count from APPENDIX # by including all categories with the title "dropout," then the total for the four comprehensive high schools would not be 252, but rather 331. If we assume the school committee is also a legitimate source to represent the numbers of dropouts then why the discrepancies? Which has me further question, what makes up the "final dropout" categories reported to the State? To reiterate what Marcus has already said: "If you really went to that school and you was there, you'd be thinking, like, 'I know

for a fact this many kids didn't pass,' so like, if it looks good on paper, nobody is gonna do the research —did this many students pass?"

I suggest all the categories included in APPENIX #, both "dropouts" and "long term suspensions" count as institutionally "placed-out" students. These categories of students, regardless of the reasons for why they transferred out share a similar experience in needing to find alternative education in Worcester. If we were to use this data, under my suggested frames for inclusion of students institutionally "placed-out," then we would not have a 252 student "dropout" population with similar needs, but rather, a total of 415 students (12% of the student body population) in need of a second chance opportunity for school completion. We, a concerned public, should be wary of how much trust we put in our numerical authorities.

*Massachusetts School Discipline Law.* On August 6, 2012, the Governor of Massachusetts signed House Bill 4332 into law as Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012. This legislation went into effect on July 1, 2014. This law was initiated due to public advocacy and response to national trends on school discipline. Trends include: severe consequences of 'zero tolerance' discipline policies, disparate impact on student of color and students with disabilities, increased demands to prepare all students to graduate college-and career-ready. Major regulations under this law include: the use of suspensions and expulsions as a last resort; requirements for districts to collect and report data on school discipline to the Department; the notification and inclusion of parents in disciplinary hearings; education services must be provided to allow students the opportunity towards academic progress or alternative education services (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, para. 1-4).

How is the new Massachusetts school discipline system going to work? These districts will most certainly retain punitive institutional practices that will use alternative schools as a place to punish, furthering its stigma, especially when these alternative schools and programs have already proven to be punitive and inadequate in their current practice. Should alternative schools and programs be reporting their discipline practices as well? We should be wary of the use of transfers to alternative schools as alternative solutions for when districts will no longer be able to use suspensions and expulsions to get rid of "troublemakers." What are the implications of this legislation and how can we make sure these programs are helpful and not just another route or place that leads to more finite exclusions? A key suggestion for the application of this policy would be to bridge the communication between comprehensive schools and alternative learning sites. The resource connection and mentoring students shouldn't end with the exclusion or release. This is particularly important in the "temporary" stays at these alternative schools that will most likely be an important implementation by districts as a main form of discipline.

### **Final conclusions**

If these four young men represented in this study are only a portion of the population attending alternative learning sites, then these struggles can be said to be more widespread than second chance rhetoric would claim them to be. What we can learn from Daryn, Oscar, Marcus and Terrence is how perseverance matters in pursuing opportunities through these learning sites. When one route was cut off for them, in order to move forward, they had to detour through another route, sometimes several alternative

routes to that final completion of school. These young navigators continued to accumulate a unique experience of the opportunity structure in Worcester; moving from opportunity to opportunity to get what they needed. The purpose of this study was to critically investigate the punitive patterns that exist in these "second chance" opportunities experienced by four young men who had been placed-out of schools in Worcester, MA. My goals for this work were to present the often unheard experiences of struggle with finding the enabling conditions for opportunity. This motivation was always at the center of my reflections and inquires, however, I found the direction of my work to be more than providing a different narrative, it grew from a deep seeded outrage of how schooling institutions were shaping the educational experiences of their students through punitive (both passive and aggressive) institutional practices. It has also always been about how young people craft and foster inclusion in their lives, how they assert their rights to be included in opportunity through education and schooling. Alternative Learning Sites present themselves as a space for educational decision makers to make the most advance in creating more socially just outcomes for young people and in providing more equitable opportunities.

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APPENDIX A

TRANSFERRING STUDENTS OUT: STUDENT TRANSFERS BY SCHOOL AND  
REASON FOR TRANSFER, 2011-12

<i>Student transfers by school and reason for transfer, 2011-12</i>		
<i>School</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Number</i>
<i>Burncoat Senior High School</i>	<i>Dropout-GED or other adult ed</i>	<i>19</i>
	<i>Dropout- Jail</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>Dropout- Job Corps</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Dropout- Unknown status/location</i>	<i>48</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension for 37H 1/2 violations</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension with Alternative Program</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>Doherty Memorial High School</i>	<i>Completed terminal program and 12th grade but no diploma</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Dropout - Confirmed dropout, plans unknown</i>	<i>11</i>
	<i>Dropout- Employment</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>Dropout- GED or other adult ed</i>	<i>30</i>
	<i>Dropout- Job Corps</i>	<i>8</i>
	<i>Dropout- Unknown status/location</i>	<i>13</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension for 37H 1/2 violations</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension with Alternative Program</i>	<i>13</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>81</i>

<i>Student transfers by school and reason for transfer, 2011-12, cont.</i>		
<i>School</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Number</i>
<i>North High School</i>	<i>Dropout- Confirmed dropout, plans unknown</i>	<i>52</i>
	<i>Dropout- Employment</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Dropout- GED or other adult ed</i>	<i>34</i>
	<i>Dropout- Jail</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Dropout- Job Corps</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension for 37H 1/2 violations</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension with Alternative Program</i>	<i>8</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>110</i>
<i>South Community High School</i>	<i>Dropout- Confirmed dropout, plans unknown</i>	<i>28</i>
	<i>Dropout- GED or other adult ed</i>	<i>11</i>
	<i>Dropout- Jail</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>Dropout- Job Corps</i>	<i>7</i>
	<i>Dropout- Unknown status/location</i>	<i>49</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension for 37H 1/2 violations</i>	<i>18</i>
	<i>Longterm Suspension with Alternative Program</i>	<i>28</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>144</i>
<i>District Total - Comprehensive High Schools</i>		<i>415</i>
<i>Note: 37H1/2 violations indicates student charged with a felony or felony delinquency complaint Adapted from WPS School Committee Archives (7/26/2012), ANNEX A gb #0-293.1 p.1-2(accessed 4.13)</i>		

